

## Features

3/30/2015

### Delivering on a Helpful Promise

*John Bray*



Ace Hardware is upfront in its tagline, saying exactly what it's going to do right—"The Helpful Place"—and the company delivers just that. At Ace, helpful isn't a saying or a word or an idea, it's an identity and it's ingrained in the company. According to JD Power, Ace has been ranked highest in customer satisfaction among home improvement retailers for eight years in a row.

"We are the helpful place," says Jay Heubner, Director of Retail Training at Ace Hardware. "That's not a price point or a product, it's a human behavior." In other words, Ace is staking its name not on what it sells, but on what it offers that goes well beyond the sale.

However, with just under 5,000 stores worldwide carrying the Ace name, this helpful behavior needs to be more than assumed; it needs to be built in, practiced and trained.

"[Helpful] doesn't just happen by accident ... [our associates are] very well trained," Jay says. "I call it 'operationalizing helpful.'" Ace is well equipped to help all of its employees—from store managers and sales associates to back office and warehouse staff—learn how to master that behavior and live up to the tagline.

### The Numbers Don't Lie

The co-op structure of Ace means the corporate office cannot necessarily force things on stores, which does add an interesting twist to this already daunting challenge, but that's where numbers come in.

"We're constantly running analytics and proving that the training ties directly to sales increases," says Jay. For example, his team can easily show the effectiveness of Ace's brand fulfillment training—"Certified Ace Helpful"—in very appealing terms, including increased units per transaction and repeat customers. If that makes helpful sound systematic and rehearsed, that's because the reality of delivering on that helpful promise through approximately 80,000 employees requires it. But training can't stop at behaviors alone.

Jay is well aware that "helpful" doesn't cover everything. "It's impossible for us to be the helpful place by just being friendly," he says of their approach to living up to the tagline. "That's only part of the equation. We have to be knowledgeable as well." Just as any store can have awesome products, any store can have friendly

service. The key is to have both.

With approximately 30,000 SKUs at Ace, product training isn't a walk in the garden department. Figure in the aisles housing dozens upon dozens of individual nuts, bolts and otherwise, and there's a lot that sales associates need to know. Jay's team manages this challenge in several ways. At the foundation are basic training/product knowledge courses from the National Retail Hardware Association for those new to Ace. From there, very detailed, deep-dive training is always being developed internally for specific areas, such as LED lighting or plumbing. Then there's in-the-moment learning and that's when headsets are critical: "Headsets are super important because they build confidence in the associates," says Jay.

Even if a sales associate finds him or herself in a tough spot with some questions they can't answer, headsets keep coworkers close. After all, Ace is about being helpful, but that doesn't mean having every answer on the spot; it means helping to provide the answer through various different means. And at Ace, that answer is almost always "yes."

"We have to slow down the no process and find a way to come to yes," says Jay, noting that there's always a yes to be found.

## Finding The Yes

Matt Deitz, Owner of Ace Hardware of Verona in Verona, Virginia, agrees. "There's pretty much nothing we can't do for customers," he says of his store's approach. "It might take a day longer or an hour longer to get certain products, but if you lay out those options and work with the consumer to make the best decision for them, then it's a win for you." It's clear this focus on customers and delivering on the tagline promise transitions from corporate to stores fairly seamlessly. And Matt takes this promise seriously.

"[Customer service] is the heartbeat of the organization," says Matt. "Without satisfied customers coming in day after day, none of us have a business." And for Matt, that business is especially important because, like most Ace Hardware stores, it's a part of the community and, in some ways, it represents it. In fact, according to Kate Kirkpatrick, Corporate Media Relations Manager at Ace, roughly 70% of the United States lives within five to 10 minutes of an Ace store. That's about as close to the customers as possible.

When you're part of the community rather than simply an addition to it, customer service approaches a new high and connections with customers become more authentic.

"We can call a customer by name ... these are our friends, they're our neighbors, our business partners in the community," says Matt. It's that connection that helps deliver on an amazing experience. And Matt's secret to success is focusing internally on how his store delivers service rather than benchmarking elsewhere. "We're competing with ourselves more than we are other places," says Matt of his quest to deliver better, more helpful service every day.

And the best thing is that helpful doesn't need to be complicated. That's why, according to Jay, most customer interactions at Ace stores wrap up with a simple, non-confrontational question: "What else is on your list today?" Not only does that feel less invasive to a customer than, "Would you also like to buy a bag of

fertilizer that's on special?" it opens up the dialog, starts a conversation and builds a relationship. This all leads to happy customers, repeat business and better sales.

Maybe all of this makes it sound like Ace Hardware delivers amazing service by putting attitudes and behaviors before sales, promotions and the bottom line? In a way that's sort of the case and, as a result, the bottom line benefits. Ace is helpful and you can't put a price tag on that any day of the week. You can, however, take a page from Ace's brand fulfillment training and start to look at what helpful means for your customers and how that aligns with your current customer service focus. **GP**

---

*John Bray is an author and freelance writer living in the western suburbs of Chicago. He has a background in both creative writing and technical communications and can be reached by visiting [john-bray.com](http://john-bray.com) or by emailing [johnbray.bray@gmail.com](mailto:johnbray.bray@gmail.com).*