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The Sci-Fi Salesperson

Katie Elzer-Peters

During the busy season when customers are lining up out the door (we hope) and there aren't enough bodies to go around (the reality in this tight labor market), how do you make sure your customers are getting what they need and want? There's an app for that and a piece of paper and some data and… the list goes on. Here's how to make the most of it.

Identify Your Brand Position

You thought we were talking about staffing, not marketing! The thing is, customer experience and setting expectations start before someone even sets foot in the door with the marketing messages you're distributing. You need their experience to meet their expectations. And the types of tools that will help you meet expectations will differ depending on your goals.

Sam Kirkland, National Account Manager for Epicor (POS, ERP and business software), says, "You have to decide who you are, culturally, as a business. Are you a high-volume, quick-turn business or a high-quality, 'take-it-all-home -in-one-trip-and-be-done' business? It's hard to do both at the same time and you can't be everything to everyone."

You might be able to look around your store and identify that you're high-volume, quick-turn or vice versa. If you're not certain about your position because you run splashy weekend promos, but also carry one of everything, you'll love the next part.

Collect Data

Maybe you've resisted solidifying brand position because you're not entirely sure who your customer is and what they want. You need data. There are two ways to go about this.

First, you can collect your own. Most POS systems offer some kind of loyalty program, from rudimentary to full bells and whistles. Tracking ZIP codes will help you see where your customers are coming from, and you can Google and find demographic data about those customers/areas. Are they mostly apartment dwellers or living on half-acre lots? Families, couples or retirees?

Assigning a loyalty program ID to each customer and then looking at reports will give you even more useful data. You'll be able to see whether most of your customers make one or two trips per year with a large bill (indicative of a trip consolidator, one-and-done customer persona), or if they come in weekly and purchase a little at a time.

The second option, if you can't collect your own data, is to purchase reports for your demographic area. GrowIt has started releasing quarterly insights, which consist of geographically defined reports complete with analysis, from the 800,000 users of the GrowIt mobile app. The reports include information about what types of questions people are

asking, the most popular plants and colors users search for, what they're sharing pictures of (are interested in or growing at home), and more. They include demographic data for Boomers, Gen X and Millennials, as well as time-specific quarterly data for planning and forecasting. Mason Day, co-founder of GrowIt, says, "Even if they don't use my information, I want garden center owners to use some information."

Analyze and Use the Data

Once you have data, use it to create specific email, social, and print marketing campaigns and corresponding in-store displays targeted toward the consolidator or the frequent buyer. Test different methods of delivery: email, social media posts and advertising, and direct mail. See what works best.

Customers will come in primed to buy specific items or groups of items. That is when your staff will really start to reap the benefits of collecting and using data—when the right customer walks into the store wanting what you actually have on offer, the sale made before anyone even enters your store.

Tap Into the Cloud

With customers in the door, now what? Let's say they know they want a citrus tree and they walk in asking for it. With a cloud-based POS, store associates carrying a Wi-Fi-enabled phone with POS access on it can immediately let the customer know what's in stock, without sending them to an information desk and risking them getting lost or distracted. The associate can also recommend products to upsell (to increase the bottom line) and to make sure the customer has everything he or she needs to be successful (elevate the customer experience).

Maybe your customers need information before they can select a product. The Perfect Plant is one such option. It's a cloud-based plant, pest and disease identification database that can be pulled into garden center websites and installed on kiosks in stores. Customers can search for plants based on characteristics or disease treatments based on plant symptoms, as can staff.

"This is wonderful. We've had some great feedback from both employees and customers on this already—it's a helpful resource," says Regan Glover, of Glover Nursery in Salt Lake City, Utah, about The Perfect Plant.

Ken Klopp, owner of The Perfect Plant, says, "Longevity in use of the product is key. Our retailers have seen a 16% to 65% increase in usage by customers and staff year over year."

Ken, as well as every other expert consulted for this article, stressed the importance of actually using resources—directing customers and staff toward available resources.

Armitage's Great Garden Plants, an app developed by horticulture expert Dr. Allan Armitage, is sometimes called "a professor in your pocket" and lets individuals (including garden center staff) look up info about annuals and perennials on the spot.

Continue Low-Tech Options

One component of The Perfect Plant is a shelf-talker program. Customers can scan a QR code and pull up the database right on their phones to get answers in-store. Signs—so low tech, but still so effective.

In fact, Brian Wilson, from Wilson's Garden Center in Newark, Ohio, has an app, but says he actually gets more use out of the shelf talkers and signs they place throughout the store.

"We don't just use price signs. Every endcap has a sign and we place educational signage throughout the store." He says they also print fact sheets from their local cooperative extension office or use those fact sheets as a starting point to create their own.

You don't need tons of tech to experience bionic sales. In the end, what turns your sales associates into selling

machines is using the tools available, rather than letting them gather dust on the shelf. **GP**

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Making a loyalty plan work

Epicor's Sam Kirkland says it's important to clearly define your loyalty program and make sure every staff member knows the elevator pitch. An employee should be able to capture data and sign someone up in 10 seconds with their name and email address. Adding the address adds only a few seconds. He says it's still worth it even with multiple people in line at the register because of how valuable the data is that you'll be able to capture. On busy days, assigning a staff member to walk the line and enter customers is also effective.

Incentivize collection. Set up metrics and offer rewards when different business-wide benchmarks are met. Don't be afraid to ask customers twice. Sam says he was at an event for one retailer where, after the first no, the staff said, "I get it, and 'no' is fine, but it is the easiest way to get coupons from us." After that, he said, most people signed up.