

Lacklustre sales staff cost SA retailers dearly

 By [Sandra Steenkamp](#)

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The indifferent attitude of South African retail sales staff when interacting with customers is not only costing retailers valuable sales but, in some cases, even delivering customers right into the hands of competitors. The result is an increasingly discontented consumer base that is becoming more discerning when it comes to spending its hard-earned rands.



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These are just some of the alarming findings coming out of our ongoing research into the South African retail sector using mystery shopping – the evaluation of companies' goods, services and compliance levels from the perspectives of their customers.

Our research has revealed telling insights into shoppers' perceptions of retail brands and, specifically, their in-store experiences, which have a profound effect on brand loyalty, repeat business and word-of-mouth referrals – all critical sales drivers in the current economy.

The biggest challenge

The factor that has emerged as the biggest challenge facing retailers is reactive sales staff. Often, instead of greeting new customers at the door, enquiring as to their specific needs, and showing them the products that best meet these requirements, sales staff stand around chatting to colleagues, pack shelves or even blatantly ignore customers.

In such instances, interaction with the brand (if at all) is initiated by customers, through them querying product availability, current promotions or pricing when inattentive staff have overlooked that too.

The opportunity to engage customers positively from the outset, and set the tone of their in-store experiences of the brand, is lost.

Linked to reactive staff is their apparent disinterest in offering customers relevant sales add-ons or product alternatives.

Complementary products

Staff appear to be content simply to make the sale the consumer was originally drawn to, but miss out on offering additional products once they have profiled the customer and his needs. There are always complementary products that can be sold alongside key purchase items. The trick is for salespeople to identify these products quickly and offer them to the customer as he's making that all important purchasing decision.

Similarly, staff do not consistently offer alternative products should the one the customer is looking for be unavailable. An excellent salesperson would immediately provide suitable alternatives, offer to locate the item at other stores or put the product on order.

This exemplary service would be further elevated with the salesperson tracking the status of the product or order, and keeping in touch with the customer in this regard. Sadly, our research shows that instead of this experience, consumers often have to settle for mediocre apologies that the product is out of stock or worse, being sent to nearby competitors.

Missed opportunities

Sidelining sales add-ons and product alternatives are missed opportunities that could easily translate into profit-boosting sales.

Sales staff might be doing a satisfactory job, but without the wow service factor, retailers' sales will never reach their full potential. Proactive staff who are engaged, interested and motivated are essential; they help customers feel valued when they leave, inspired to return and willing to recommend the store to friends and family.

And with consumers' wallets being squeezed even further in 2016, these hallmarks of a superior in-store experience and brand interaction are, quite frankly, priceless.

ABOUT SANDRA STEENKAMP

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