



## Cultivating a Culture of Customer Service

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Singapore's retail scene is blessed by a strong economy, a busy airport that acts as a gateway to Southeast Asia and a population that sees shopping as a national pastime. Subsequently, an ever increasing number of new and improved stores – from mega-malls to boutiques – line the city-state's bustling streets, from the city to the heartlands. Today, consumers in Singapore have more choice than ever before. But for retailers, this means increased competition and, importantly, a deepening need for differentiation, which is consistently supported by exceptional customer experiences.

The key driver for ensuring a consistent and differentiated consumer experience is, as you might expect, delivering stellar service – an attribute that many of the country's retailers fail to appropriately address. A recent mystery shopper exercise by The Straits Times, for example, revealed that out of 16 outlets assessed only seven (44 percent) recorded scores for service standards above 'average'. The main causes of complaint were a lack of engagement with customers throughout the shopping experience and selective service based on perceived wealth – especially in luxury goods stores. The exercise also highlighted a general lack of passion for service among staff.

To succeed in today's competitive retail environment, stores today need to redefine their understanding of what customer service truly means. It is more than just a set of unimplemented brand values concocted by the marketing team or pricing strategies. It is differentiating the brand in the consumer's mind by ensuring a favourable perception that exceeds expectations.



## **Embracing the Customer Experience**

Customers' perceptions of their in-store experiences have the power to increase brand loyalty, create word-of-mouth referrals and generate repeat sales. To be successful, retailers need to prepare and put in place a cohesive plan to deliver quality experience and inspire staff of all levels to embody a culture that customers' value, instead of just providing customer service training to the front line. Retailers also need to ensure staff are familiar with ways to apply their new skills to create mutually beneficial relationships with customers. Simply put, customers seek out retailers who take a true interest in their needs and feelings before parting with their money. Failure to address the human component when deploying a customer experience strategy can risk service failure.

Retailers that execute a strategy of aligning a company's brand promise to its behaviour and skills will also achieve quantitative and qualitative results, a decrease in management and front-line turnover, and increased productivity.

## **From the top**

A successful, meaningful strategy for a differentiated customer experience needs to be defined at the top and aligned with brand positioning and business objectives. Once it is established, the next step is to communicate the strategy to staff and articulate what every level is required to do to execute it: how they are going to achieve the mark and how success will be measured. By demonstrating the value of the strategy and the role every employee can play in achieving it, retailers will also enhance the commitment and motivation of the team. A clear brand strategy can also help create positive attitudes and instill passion amongst staff, inspiring them to deliver great service. Without alignment from key stakeholders, they run the risk of multiple interpretations of the strategy and a lack of consistent brand experiences.

## **Training & Development**

Too often, retailers reject the idea of developing the skills of their store personnel beyond the actual job requirements. Many cite high staff turnover or payroll expenses as reasons for this. The reality, however, is that people development is critical to brand differentiation and revenue success. In today's



new consumer economy, it must therefore be viewed as an operational imperative and not just an HR “nice to have.”

Store managers have an important role to play in the execution and support of such training initiatives due to their frequent interaction with store personnel. It is therefore important that they are equipped with the skills required to effectively assess, teach and reinforce desired skills. Focused development and coaching from store managers also helps foster a cohesive and supportive work environment, which directly influences productivity and can improve retention rates by as much as 30 percent.

### **Full Attention**

The increasingly competitive retail market underscores the need to pay attention to the customer experience, managing it one customer at a time. Building a customer-focused culture requires a new focus that blends operational excellence with human capital delivery. They are not separate, and both are essential to driving revenue and breaking the commoditisation of the retail brand.

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