

"My employees get busy working in the back of our retail shop and then don't answer the phone or help out up front. How can I get the point across that we all have to take care of customers. Customers pay the bills, including our salaries."

Sometimes employees aren't clear about their responsibilities. Some employees are shy, or concerned they don't know how to handle a customer properly. It's the owner's job to set the tone, reinforce the message and insist on enough training to get the point across that customers are job No. 1 for everyone in the company.

A Rotation Schedule

Sometimes the best of intentions turns into the worst of outcomes. An eager owner rushes forward to greet customers. Customers gravitate to the owner who can cut deals and meet special needs. Employees learn to hang back and focus where they think they can do the most to help – backing up the owner by putting together deliveries, while the owner takes center stage with customers.

One way to get everyone in the groove of handling customers is to assign rotations. One person stays in the front of the shop, answers the phone and handles customers. If overloaded, he asks for help. With a rotation schedule, everyone in the shop gets to practice front-of-the house skills. And the owner gets rotated off the floor, so he or she doesn't interfere.

Make sure the phone rings loudly on every telephone in the shop. Have at least one or two phones within easy reach of the work areas, along with a phone at the front counter. Tell everyone the phone will be picked up within two to three rings. If it gets past two rings, assume the front counter person is tied up, and everyone jumps to pick up by the third ring.

If possible, put in a glass window or see-through mirror between the front and back of the shop. Install a buzzer or intercom so the front counter person can signal when he needs assistance. If everyone in the back can see and hear what's going on in the shop all the time, they're more likely to be aware of needs out front.

Everyone is Accountable

Be aware that, in retail, work ebbs and flows. There are days and hours that are more and less busy. Track activity over a few weeks, to get a feel for when the phone calls and walk-ins pick up or drop off.

Consider adding a part-timer to assist during the busiest periods. Schedule assembly and deliveries during the slowest periods. Think about overlapping work hours – some people start early and go home early, some start later and go home later.

Set a schedule of activities. Shop supplies get laid out and open orders get checked first thing in the morning. Mid-day includes a quick cleanup and review of rush orders that have to be filled quickly. End of day includes cleaning up, organizing for the next day and making sure all deliveries are completed before everyone goes home.

Recognize that it can be hard to be interrupted while putting together orders. Losing count, forgetting where you are in the process, having to start something over are only a few of the obvious challenges employees may think about as they hear the phone ring. Ask staff to set up a cue of first, second and third responders, assigning the most complex assembly tasks to the last responders, in hopes they will be interrupted only infrequently.

If you find employees hesitate to jump forward to greet customers, consider training. Pair the employee who hangs back with an employee who is more outgoing. Give shy employees a chance to see that it's easier than they think to take care of customers.

If an employee continues to hang back, sit down and discuss the situation. Is this the right job? Is he prepared to learn a new set of skills? Or would it be better to look for work elsewhere? Make sure you keep all employees accountable for job No. 1: servicing the customer.

Looking for a good book? Try "Customer Service for Dummies" by Karen Leland and Keith Bailey.

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