

THE RETAIL DOCTOR | BY BILLY CUTHRELL

# Finding Good Apples

Ever held a firm, ripe-looking apple in your hand, only to bite in and find it was sour? You'd picked through all the apples and thought you had the perfect one, but you'd been fooled by the outside. The same analogy can be made for employees who turn into sour apples after a few weeks or months on the job.

I recently interviewed prospective candidates for a front desk position, and it occurred to me that making sure people were enthusiastic was just as important as doing a background check. However, you can't background check character. So, I considered some shared characteristics of the really great people I hired in the past.



## SPEAKING UP

Nothing — and I mean nothing — throws up a red flag faster than a prospective employee who sits in an interview and says little to nothing.

I like a more conversational interview where we can chat in a relaxed atmosphere. I remind prospects that they're not interviewing for a position at the Los Alamos National Lab, where they'd need top-secret clearance. I explain that we have a fun, laid-back environment where musicians, parents, kids and adults from all walks of life gather to make music and unwind, so employees need to be comfortable talking.

Can prospects enthusiastically approach strangers who walk in the shop and help them find what they're looking for, or will prospects sit behind the counter, mumble "hello" and stare at a computer screen? Rejection can be tough, and sometimes, customers want to be left alone to browse. Can prospects keep smiles on their faces when told, "I'm just looking," and politely say, "No problem. My name is Erin. Just let me know if I can help you with

anything." Will they say "hello" when people enter and "Have a great day" when people leave? Will prospects tell you when they see something that needs improvement and follow up with their ideas for improving it? Will they tell you if they see other employees steal or tell you who's doing a great job helping customers? Will they tell you they enjoy working in your shop, or will they say little, as

they did during the interview?

All of our great hires have said they enjoyed working in our shops. All have shared ideas for making our shops better. All have gotten compliments from customers for being helpful and friendly. I may not have acted on all of my great employees' ideas, but at least the really great employees spoke up and got involved.

## GOING THE EXTRA MILE

A few weeks ago, I worked a Friday night to fill in for a teacher who had surgery earlier that week. I thought I was the last person in the shop, but when I went upfront to close down, I noticed our recent hire, an 18-year-old named Jade, sitting behind the front desk — not dabbling on Facebook, not playing games on the computer, but finishing her work. The afternoon had been busy, and Jade didn't get a chance to complete her work, so she stayed late. I was delighted to see her taking responsibility and not putting things off until Monday when she was scheduled to work again.

But I was even more pleased knowing Jade wasn't putting off her work on someone else to do the next day. In Jade's initial interview with us, she carried a conversation easily, was polite and said she was willing to work various hours as long as it didn't conflict with her school schedule. She was a team player,

**How to avoid hiring seemingly good prospects who turn into sour apples on the job**

but most important, Jade smiled. A lot. She could tune and restring a guitar but admitted she needed some practice and would like to brush up on her guitar repair skills. She also acknowledged, almost as if she were embarrassed, that she didn't know much about drums and keyboards, but we knew we could teach her the ropes. We also knew we couldn't make people naturally smile, but all of our really great hires smile. A lot.

**TAKING OWNERSHIP**

I see lots of excuses and lame attempts to pass the blame and make problems someone else's to fix. I can't stand it, but I can't completely blame people for doing this because it's the example they see and hear every day. From our government "leaders" to managers to business owners, everyone wants to assign guilt to someone else. I certainly don't expect people to take ownership of things they didn't do, but sometimes, you need to take ownership to solve problems, retain a customer and make the situation right.

One recent afternoon, I was behind our reception desk helping a customer when I overheard a tense conversation between my employee and an upset guitar student. The student's lesson had been canceled because his regular teacher was out. The teacher's wife had gone into labor and had to leave early. We'd called and left voice mails for all the afternoon students, asking if we could reschedule since a substitute teacher was unavailable on short notice. This student wasn't upset that his lesson had been canceled as much as that he wasn't notified.

When I finished with my customer, I made myself look busy while I waited to see if my employee could resolve the issue. She listened and repeatedly apologized for our teacher as the customer expressed his frustration. She said she understood his frustration since he drove in traffic, only to have no teacher and no lesson. She explained that all we had on file was his cell phone number — there was no work or home number listed. And she explained that, when we checked his registration form, we found he left all the contact spaces blank except for his cell phone number with a note that he "only accepts calls on his cell." There was no e-mail address on file either.

My employee's calm demeanor with a dif-

ferent customer was impressive. She pointed out the possibility that, even though we left a voice mail, technology isn't perfect and the message could've been lost by his service provider. She said she'd make it right and do whatever it took to resolve the issue. She also stressed that he knew we would work to find solutions for future issues if lessons needed to be canceled again on short notice.

She checked another teacher's schedule,

saw a cancellation and put the student in that spot. By the time she was done, the student had cooled off. Our contact information was updated to include all of his phone numbers and e-mail addresses. Plus, he got the lesson he paid for and thanked our employee for helping him so quickly. **MI**

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