

# IDEAS

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INDEPENDENT RETAIL | BY TED ESCHLIMAN

## WHEN YOU HAVE TIME

Last month, I wrote about strategies for competing in the frenetic, modern sales culture, suggesting steps for offering effective service with minimal staff. Now, I'd like to address the opposite: what to do during those dead times of customer drought.

Extended staff downtime can be a challenge for store managers. At best, an employee's "project" will sometimes supersede customer needs. At worst, employees will let their guards down, and their idleness will turn into mischief.

We've all been on the other end of the checkout counter, standing in line while clerks talk with each other instead of focusing on customers. It seems harder than ever to teach the "me"-generation employee that he or she is on the clock to help patrons, not to catch up on the latest Facebook post. Our job is to instill optimal staff sensitivity — employee-to-employee chitchat that can't include customers is better left for another time and out of earshot.

Disneyland has a whole worker culture of cast and audience, and it's an outstanding



### How to ensure customer care during periods of extended staff downtime

mentality for specialty retail. Once employees don a costume, they're onstage. It wouldn't hurt for our employees to follow that example. They're on the clock to present a show, to provide a positive gestalt directed at people walking the grounds. Relentless service is their performance from the moment they punch the clock to

when they leave.

In the same light, cast members must understand that their personal needs, including breaks, lunch hours, and talk of hunger or headaches, never trump those of the customer. Such phrases as, "I need to take my break," or "Man, I drank too much last night," should never be uttered near customers. It's equal to talking about your parents having sex. (You know it happens, but you never want to talk about it.) Yes, crew must eat, take breaks and use the bathroom, but this needs to be worked out offstage.

**The customer is always first.** Staff don't just wait on customers. Employees have floor duties — pricing, stocking shelves, straightening and an assortment of other tasks. There's an earnest battle between store productivity and customer attentiveness, but in the conflict, the customer must always come first. It's easy to get lost in projects, but bottom line: Store projects go away if customers go away.

It isn't always easy to judge the level of courtesy a customer needs. You've heard the saying, "They don't want to be sold something." But I believe that

we often take detachment to an extreme and aren't helpful enough. Working on a project near but just outside of a customer's space could actually put him or her at ease. From there, we can keep the radar on for signals that customers want help, especially when they're ready to purchase. (Hint: This also cuts down on shoplifting.)

**Show undeniable body language.** I studied drama in school. It was enlightening to learn how much time is spent on body motion. A large portion of a thespian's work is developing skills in controlling movement — and with good reason. Our bodies communicate more than our words do. When we walk a customer to an area of the store rather than point to a spot 300 feet away, it conveys much more care. We need to show, not just tell.

It can be argued that Facebook, Twitter, message boards and texting are robbing a generation of these social skills. We need to commit to training them back in. **MI**

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