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# Smile, and the World Shops with You

Michigan retailers find success in getting back to customer service basics

by LIZ PARKS

It's common sense that sales, profits and customer loyalties are affected by employee behavior — making eye contact, smiling while greeting customers and listening carefully to understand what customers need. According to the 2012 American Express Global Customer Service Barometer, 66 percent of respondents said they would spend more with a company they believe provided excellent customer service.

"It's hard to believe how many retail stores don't have employees or even owners who make eye contact or smile or make customers feel welcome," says Mary Kabisa, owner of gift and décor shop Casa De Amici in Highland, Mich. "It may be partly because of all the technology that people use today. People are losing social skills, and these are skills that you need for

living — as well as for sales."

Ken Snook, who owns Colasanti's Market adjacent to Kabisa's store, says he can't understand why some employees appear uncaring for the businesses they work for. "I've been in stores where employees are talking among themselves ... not noticing customers," he says. "They don't seem to know that if their store doesn't do well with customers, their jobs will go away."

## UNDERSTANDING CUSTOMER NEEDS

The challenge is making good customer service happen, and happen consistently. Kabisa and Snook have found a tool to assist their employees in that endeavor: the book *Smile: Sell More with Amazing Customer Service* by Kirt Manecke.

Manecke co-owned a store in Keego Harbor, Mich., that specialized in

swim, sun and surf gear and apparel some 25 years ago. He and his partners opened their store across the street from a popular store that initially carried a broader assortment of top-line brands. "We knew we had to give outstanding service or we would never last six months," he says.

Manecke developed an employee manual and training program that placed a lot of emphasis on understanding individual customers' needs. Employees were trained in product knowledge, of course, but the store's key "point of difference was our people skills training, which helped our staffers talk confidently and comfortably to customers," Manecke says, "making them feel welcome."

"We seldom had a [sale] that was for one item only. By getting to know our customers and asking questions about what they wanted to do, we

could help them buy — from us and not from some other store later on — the supplemental items that they would also need,” he says.

That manual became the template for *Smile*.

### EASY TO IMPLEMENT

Snook describes *Smile* as “very simple, very effective. It helps me create the environment I want for my employees and customers.”

Kabisa doesn't worry that the family members who help run the store lack people skills, but she says she finds *Smile* so helpful that she's given a copy to virtually everyone in her family. Snook's employees — some 75 off-season and more than 100 in the summer — have all read the book. Snook and department heads hold regular meetings in which employees talk about the book, answer questions and discuss reactions.

Those meetings are important, says Snook, because they make implementing the actions described in the book “a team effort. ... It makes a difference, as the book points out, to smile when you say ‘Hi’ or ask if you can help someone. Even if you smile while you are talking to someone on the phone, there's an inflection in your voice that people can hear and it makes them feel better and that makes them want to come back.”

Kabisa says she needs to “read the book myself. Regularly. ... We all have days when things don't go well. But we can't bring that into our store environments. We need to be there for our customers. And if we can make a customer feel good, feel appreciated, feel welcome, then that makes us feel good as well.”

### TANGIBLE RESULTS

Kabisa displays *Smile* next to the checkout and near the gift wrap desk. She says about half the book's sales are to individuals attracted by the title. They'll ask about it, which often leads to loyalty-building conversations. The rest of the sales come from business



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owners or managers who buy multiple copies to use as training tools.

In one instance, Kabisa says the wife of a man who owns a restaurant in a nearby casino gave a copy to her husband. Casino customers were given complimentary meals at their restaurant but waitresses were not treating “comp” customers well, expecting poor or no tips.

After the husband used *Smile* to help retrain the waitresses, “their attitude changed,” Kabisa says. “They became nicer to their customers. They gave better service, so the way their customers treated them changed.”

“We have a very good team,” says Snook, “but there are always some people who need to understand how they can make customers really like their experience with us. The book makes it easier for me to explain that. ... it becomes clearer for our employees to understand that, even when

they are going on break, if they see a customer who looks like they need something, they should stop and help that customer.

“They're wearing a uniform. Customers can see that they work here. The customer doesn't know that someone's on break, and it shouldn't matter whether they are on break or not. If a customer is in your store, you want them to feel welcome, appreciated and valued.”

Kabisa says something very similar. “Even if someone comes in, looks around, but doesn't buy anything, I want them to feel welcome. If they feel welcome, when they're ready to buy and they like what they see in our store and the way they are treated, they'll come back.” **STORES**

Liz Parks is a Union City, N.J.-based writer with extensive experience reporting on retail, pharmacy and technology issues.