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- selling from their own pockets
- not charging accurate prices
- underusing your order-entry software
- not consistently offering add-ons
- failing to capture e-mail addresses

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BY TIM HUCKABEE, AIFSE

breaking in new hires

A step-by-step plan for training new employees how to sell to and serve your customers.

I was thrown to the wolves. Metaphorically speaking, that's how I was trained at the flower shop where I used to work. I was told to sit, watch and listen to a coworker take orders. Once she felt I was "OK," I was let loose on customers—with no real formal training. Sadly, I was tremendously underprepared for many of the most basic questions and situations that arise daily in a flower shop. I'm sure I didn't instill much confidence in customers during those first few days I was on the phone.

Does this scenario sound familiar? As I have seen in my travels to shops large and small since 1997, it's more the rule than the exception. Expecting new hires to learn your business through osmosis is a scary way of tackling such an important process. This month I am going to give you a new perspective and outline for implementing a true customer-service and sales training program at your shop.

Step 1: Review your materials.

What materials do you hand to your trainees? Just pointing out various lists posted on the walls is not enough. Create a workbook with printed prices for all your merchandise, computer codes, store policies, etc. The more information you can give to your new hires, the less likely you are to have mistakes because "No one ever told me that."

Step 2: Set an agenda. What does a new employee walk into on his or her first day? It's usually a hasty introduction to some of the key people and a "nickel" tour. Here's my advice: Really show him or her around, and explain your store policies and what is expected. Break this down into a simple list. It could read, for example, "Welcome to XYZ Flower Shop. We are happy to have you here, and we will spend the next [three] days teaching you all you need to know to start serving our customers. On Day One, you will On Day Two, you will"

Step 3: Get the bigger picture.

Even if you are hiring someone who worked in another flower shop, give that person the most rounded training possible. Allocate time (even a few hours) for the new employee to work in the design department, watching how orders are filled, to help him or her make a visual correlation between size and price. Send the person out on at least one or two delivery runs. Some time devoted to helping process flowers is a great help, too. This "crash course" will quickly build the employee's product knowledge. What about processing orders—taking orders step by step from the printers to the design department? Don't forget to walk through your Web site, too, pointing out popular items and how to search for products.

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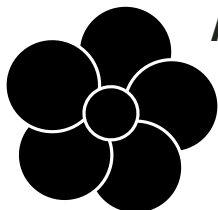
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success strategies

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Step 4: Play by the rules. When I am training at a flower shop, I ask each employee: "If you are selling an arrangement to me on the phone and you start with a \$50 price, what's the next price you'd give me?" Sometimes in a group of six people, I get six different prices ranging from \$55 to \$85! That kind of response tells me that there is no real consistency at that store. Simply put, a customer could speak to a different staff member every time he or she calls and be given a totally different set of prices! My point here is to commit to paper all the critical prices and policies, eliminating as many gray areas as possible. Along with prices, you should outline your policies for handling complaints and replacements, handling inquiries about weddings or donations, sending copies of invoices, etc.

Step 5: Discuss delivery. The delivery aspect of your business can be daunting to new hires. Start by explaining where you deliver, what the cut-off times are and the fees. If you offer express delivery, go into detail about that extra service, as well: costs, time lines, protocol. Beyond understanding the logistics of delivery, someone new to the floral industry also needs to be educated about how long it takes to design an arrangement, how arrangements are sent out with other designs, and that a flower shop—contrary to popular belief—is not like a pizza parlor with a van always idling to immediately whisk away an order as soon as a customer hangs up. You also should address your wire-order procedures at this point: your fees, which service(s) you use, how the process works, how to take an incoming order, etc.

Step 6: Hit the keys. Your order-entry software should be "introduced" to new hires as an important part of your entire business, from taking orders to coordinating deliveries to creating

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invoices. Your responsibility is to make sure that new employees learn all the major functions of the system before they start taking orders. Otherwise, they will create problems with incomplete billing information, wrong product codes, etc. If you don't already have a training manual or DVD for your staff to view, *call the company that sold you the software!* Get your money's worth, and ask for all the training materials and tools they can send you. I recommend that you have new hires begin taking practice orders with a coworker acting like a customer and guiding them through which keys to press and fields to complete. Contact me regarding the order-entry flow charts I have created for all the major POS systems.

Step 7: Take the test. I hear owners and managers complain about new hires, often mentioning that they have been with the company for weeks and still are not doing what is expected. I wonder if they think the employees suddenly are going to "get it," or why they even get to that point—weeks of paying someone who they're not sure can cut it. Here's an easier alternative: Test new hires during training, and do not let them move to the next stage of training until they have passed. For example, role-play being a customer, and see how well they take orders on the system. Give a written quiz on your policies. When you let someone who is just mediocre join your team, you hurt customers and store morale.

Bottom line, the more guidance you can give your employees from the start, the better they will represent your business. I have seen how just a little training can go a long way to make new hires feel welcome, empowered and excited about working in our industry. ■

Tim Huckabee, AIFSE, is president of FloralStrategies, an on-site training organization for retail florists based in New York, N.Y. For further help with selling, contact him by phone at (800) 983-6184 or by e-mail at contact@floralstrategies.com, or visit www.floralstrategies.com.

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