15 Things You Can Do Now That Will Pay Off Big

It is time to take a minute to assess where your store is now, where you want to be and put into motion some of the following ideas that will make a difference in your business all year long.

First, take a field trip and a day off, get out of your store and take a staff member with you. Visit successful stores in your area all types of stores. Notice how you feel in these stores, the ambience, the employees you encounter, the merchandise presentation, the visual displays, the entrance, the windows, the signs, the cash-wrap counter, the lighting and overall appearance.

Take notes of what you did and didn't like. At the end of the day, list at least fi ve ideas you can use to improve your business and put into action immediately. This day off will help you look at your business with a different set of eyes, it will be beneficial for you, your staff and your customers.

1. Ad/Marketing Plan for all year. Often retailers advertise only when they have extra money. Effective advertising/marketing calls for consistency and repetition. By appropriating money now for the entire year, you won't be the victim of "hit" or "miss" advertising. Steps to follow:

- Define your advertising/marketing objectives
- Create and advertising/marketing platform
- Determine your budget
- Develop a media plan

2. Plan all yearly promotions and in-store events now. Give your customers a reason to continue shopping at your store and get noticed in an over-crowded marketplace. If you want to increase sales, you must continually think of creative ways to excite your customers. Steps:

- Create new ideas and brainstorm with staff
- Evaluate what has been done in the past
- Strategic planning
- Involve your team
- Good timing and detailed planning
- Design and reserve ad space
- Contact media
- Attention getting direct mail
- Complete the theme
- Planned OTB increased for special event

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Dare to be different. Be daring and you will come up with new opportunities!

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3. Review your business goals. To remain successful and continue to grow you must plan for your success. Strategic planning can be your blueprint to achieving your goals and planning for future growth. Set the right goals, believe in them and fully give yourself to them, and a radical change, for the better, will take place in your business.

- Be specific
- Be realistic
- Be positive
- Make your goals measurable

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4. Invest in or update your current Point-of-Purchase system. If fully integrated, this technology can control:

- Inventory (from ordering through sale)
- Scanning merchandise
- Customer tracking and database
- Accounting

5. Review the terms of your lease/loan for a better deal. You might be able to secure a better deal or extend your lease to gain some Tenant Improvements from the landlord. If you have a loan, go to your bank, you might be able to re-finance it. It's worth a try -- the worst thing you can hear is "no".

6. A Focus Group. An excellent way to collect fresh new ideas.

- Gather 10 customers to "brainstorm your business"
- Keep objectives specifi c
- Appoint an outsider to moderate: more objective and effective
- Provide a discussion outline
- Hire someone to take notes
- Keep session to two hours or less
- Hold focus session in a restaurant[1]s private room
- Offer compensation, a store gift certificate worth $100
- Write thank you notes to all participants
- Promise anonymity. You'll get more honest responses and results
- Do not video-tape or have an observation "window" overlooking the group

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Ask the most honest judges of your store your customers and non-customers. Talk to your customers and listen really listen.

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7. Improve your image and customer service. Excellent customer service is no accident -- it takes a plan, a commitment, and an atmosphere of service awareness in the store.

- Decide to upgrade the stores' service level and staff attitudes
- Evaluate current customer service practices to identify needed improvements
- Plan a strategy to provide better service
- Train staff to treat customers and other staff members with respect
- Assess performance with customer feedback
- Maintain the new standard so employees will go out of their way to do things for customers

8. Build and improve your staff. Create a team that does the best possible job for the store:

- Ensure everyone understands your winning advantage and their roles in supporting it
- Be friendly to staff members but don't treat them like close personal friends
- Tell them everything and expect them to do the same
- Invest heavily in loyalty and they'll give you the same in return
- Realize that fairness establishes your credibility
- Never be too busy to laugh. Nothing gets people through a crisis like a good laugh

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When you and your staff feel the passion, you are going to be dangerous in the marketplace.

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9. Give your store a makeover. In a competitive retail environment an effective store design can give a retailer an advantage. Ten questions to ask yourself before tackling a makeover.

- Are your window displays effective?
- Have you looked at your ceiling lately?
- What condition is your signage in?
- Have you given enough attention to lighting?
- Is your cash counter at the right height?
- Does your carpet look warn or soiled?
- Are your colors soothing?
- Are you presenting merchandise in an attractive and interesting manner?
- How does traffic flow through your store?
- Have you mapped out your store?

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Don't fall blindly in love with your store. This is what your customers are supposed to do!

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10. Evaluate your store policies. The first step in evaluating your store policies is to ask yourself some simple questions. Take a moment and answer honestly.

- Is shopping in my store a customer-friendly, hassle-free experience?
- Are my store policies written for my convenience or my customers?
- If this wasn't my store, would I still shop here?
- Have I made a customer's day in the past month?

11. Turn backroom "junk" into gold. Mark it up, mark it down, return it or give it away. It's "dead money" if it's just on a shelf.

- Call vendors about aging returns, credits and faulty merchandise
- Calculate how a charitable donation will help your bottom line come tax time
- Repair damaged items and use them for prizes in contests and games to motivate employees
- Assemble gift baskets with excess or one-of-a-kind merchandise
- Rethink stock as you organize
- Display every item that is in back stock
- Ruthlessly toss everything else

12. Get to know your market and demographics -- they may have changed. Formerly homogenous communities are facing the demands of young families, immigrants, and elders. As the composition of American households continue to shift and a change in the ethnic make-up, so will the mix of retail, the products sold and the services offered need to change in order to succeed.

13. Be observant of any new consumer trends. The future of retail will be influenced by lifestyle trends, customer needs and their effect on spending. Trend and consumer awareness are invaluable, teaching us to capitalize on the newest trends and services to be successful. The awareness of trends comes from looking at all the possibilities, taking chances and taking charge of the future . . . *now!*

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14. Start a frequent buyer program. Keep customers buying! Increase sales as much as 20 percent without adding advertising expenses. Offer an incentive with a high perceived value and a low cost to you. Turn it into a "special club". This gives you an excuse to obtain database information which you can parlay into additional sales. Bonus benefi ts:

- Customers return often
- Referrals increase
- Customers not shopping your competition
- Spin-off sales should multiply
- Lose less business to one-time, cents-off coupon or discount-price competition

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Frequent-buyer programs tap a hidden resource -- your existing customers and increase sales.

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15. Help your customers shop around the clock. Retailers should experiment with store hours. Opening on Sunday (if not already doing so) may be one way to increase traffi c. Factors that should be considered when establishing store hours.

- Customer feedback
- Competition
- Other in-area retailers
- Traffi c patterns
- Employee feedback
- Local laws or shopping center regulations

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Keep learning. Take advantage of your Main Street program, Chamber of Commerce and shopping center's seminars on sales training, display, merchandising, research, advertising and promotion.

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