

CUSTOMER CHAMPIONS

How to make frontline staff your CX secret weapons



AT A GLANCE

The coronavirus pandemic has caused many of us to re-evaluate the contribution to society made by frontline workers. This includes the thousands in the retail sector working to keep shops open, shelves stocked and customers safe.

With the gradual easing of lockdown restrictions now under way, responsibility once again falls on frontline staff to ensure customers feel confident returning to stores while generating the excitement and buzz that has been sorely missing from our high streets, shopping centres and retail parks in the past year.

In partnership with customer interaction management platform Critizr, this report reveals how frontline staff can be your secret weapon in the contest to provide the most exceptional customer experience.

It drives home the value to be gained from

positive human interactions, and highlights the importance of generating and acting swiftly upon local customer feedback.

It considers, too, how aspects such as company culture, training, empowerment and rewards or incentives can be critical to ensuring frontline staff become your greatest assets.

We detail the importance of store managers in creating a culture of customer-centricity and, using first-hand testimonies, explore how the best store managers get the most out of their colleagues.

The report also profiles retailers – both from the UK and overseas – that have built a reputation for delivering outstanding customer experience through the interactions of their frontline staff.

Read on to discover the secrets to turning your frontline staff into customer champions.

Winning strategies in this report		
	Brand relevance and evolution	✓
	Agility and partnerships	
	CX	✓
	Innovation and investment	✓
	Culture and purpose	✓

Retail Week has determined the five key strategies all retailers should focus on in 2021 and beyond in order to succeed in a market transformed by technology and shifting consumer attitudes.

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RWRC: CUSTOMER CHAMPIONS

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Love this report?

Why not book in one of our experts to present the findings to your team, examining what they mean for you and your business. Contact Isobel Chillman at isobel.chillman@ascential.com.

PARTNER VIEWPOINT



NICOLAS HAMMER
CO-FOUNDER AND CEO, CRITIZR

As stores reopen, everyone in retail is relieved to see the welcome return of customers. Predictions vary as to what physical shopping will look like in the long term, but one thing is certain: customers and their behaviours have changed.

Their lockdown shopping habits are here to stay. More is being done online, on mobile and on social media – buying things, trying things on, messaging and requesting things from staff along the way. More shopping is local, as people continue to appreciate the convenience, personal service and community that neighbourhood stores can bring. What there will be less of, however, is loyalty. They say old habits die hard, but the pandemic has been the hardest of times for most. Covid necessities have loosened, if not completely undone, the ties that used to bond people to their favourite brands.

What does all of this mean for retail businesses in the months ahead? It means that every customer interaction is going to count. Understanding, engaging and exceeding the

changed expectations and needs of customers has never been more urgent. The good news is that the most important resource required to take on this challenge is already in your business: staff. When customers interact with brands, the reality is, they're interacting with people: staff in local branches, at checkouts, on the other side of a screen in online conversations. For today's retailers, this is where the real power lies when it comes to improving customer experience and building loyalty, and all too often it lies untapped.

In this report, we'll uncover the strategies, secrets and best practice that will help you build a team of empowered customer champions at your business frontline. Rather than just a response to changing consumer behaviour, this is a blueprint for driving customer obsession across the whole company. It's about ensuring all local teams have the tools and capabilities to make the best of every customer interaction, every time. If you can achieve that, long-term loyalty and market share will take care of themselves, from the shopfloor up.



This is a
blueprint for
driving customer
obsession across
the company



CRITIZR

Critizr Connection enables brands to transform their stores by empowering store managers to be in direct contact with their customers via digital communication channels. Through a direct connection with their own customers, local teams can engage, understand and build loyalty from the shop floor up. Thanks to that day-day connection with their customers, brands can become customer-obsessed and deliver exceptional customer experiences. Founded in 2012, Critizr's platform is today used in 25 countries by more than 80 of Europe's biggest companies, across 20 different sectors including retail, banking, hospitality and more. It empowers over 30,000 professionals to make sure that every customer interaction counts, every day, supporting the digital transformation and long term success of their business.



STORE ASSOCIATES: YOUR GREATEST ASSETS



Amid the challenges the coronavirus pandemic has created for the retail sector, one silver lining is the country's renewed sense of respect and admiration for frontline workers.

The public, quite literally at times, has applauded the contribution of essential retail staff who have kept shelves stocked and deliveries flowing during these difficult times. In fact, Critizr survey data shows 65% of retailers believe their local teams have more of a connection to their customers since Covid-19.

"We have seen such dedication, bravery and community spirit in the last 10 months that you cannot help but be inspired by it," says Morrisons chief executive David Potts. "During Covid, just turning up for work is often hard. But turning up, doing a brilliant job, feeding the nation and making the shops safe with a smile on your face is pretty heroic."

Employees at non-essential retailers have similarly stepped up when lockdown restrictions have been loosened, keeping customers safe in store while dealing with the constant worry of being furloughed or made redundant. This is despite many facing increased abuse and even violence as they implement Covid-related rules.

There have been many individual stories of heroism: from Boots' Prestatyn store manager Emma Hodnett – who personally delivered prescriptions to elderly and vulnerable patients after her long shift at work was over, sometimes with a bunch of flowers in tow – to the staff of Morrisons' Cannock store, who sent a hamper of baby clothes and supplies to a pregnant customer whose house had been struck by lightning.

As Fenwick boss John Edgar says of the pandemic: "It has proved your biggest asset is your people. If you can't get the people behind you, then you cannot respond to a crisis because you cannot do it all yourself."

Beyond the pandemic

Frontline staff across the retail sector have helped consumers to navigate a very different shopping experience over the past year – one where queuing systems, social distancing measures, sanitising stations and plastic screens at checkouts are now the norm.

Empathetic, personalised customer service has been more important than ever in reassuring customers during these strange and difficult times. With the reopening of non-essential retail stores on April 12, the role of front-of-house staff will remain critical as retailers strive to find the right



If you can't get the people behind you, then you cannot respond to a crisis because you cannot do it all yourself

JOHN EDGAR, FENWICK





People will return to bookshops because of the experience. You can't replace what a bookseller can do with an algorithm

LUKE TAYLOR, WATERSTONES



balance between ensuring customer safety, and generating the buzz and excitement that has been sorely missed while stores remained closed.

Beaverbrooks chief executive Anna Blackburn comments: "The biggest thing we have to deal with is about building consumer confidence and making the customer feel safe. We will get some customers coming in that feel really safe and others that have had different experiences, and it's those listening skills and the ability to pick up on non-verbal cues that are really key for a store colleague."

Store staff take centre stage

Lush retail director Kat Hannible says the biggest change for store assistants will be to make the invisible things visible: "It's a much more regulated shopping experience. We need to openly declare our processes and be visible with things like cleaning. It's a real change for us at Lush – we've gone from encouraging people to play with products to asking people to sanitise."

Asking such things of customers in a human way helps. "We've always been

a place where customers know they can speak to us about more than just what to buy," says Hannible. "That's really grown during the pandemic. People are really valuing interaction."

Waterstones retail director Luke Taylor is feeling similarly positive about shoppers coming back to stores: "People will return to bookshops because of the experience. You can't replace what a bookseller can do with an algorithm on Amazon. It's [about] good old-fashioned knowing your customers and knowing your books. You can't beat the local, face-to-face element."

The good news is that shoppers feel more comfortable about returning to stores than they did last May.

Retail Week research conducted in February reveals that almost half of people (49%) say they would be happy to shop in physical high street stores when the latest lockdown regulations are lifted, compared with 41% after the first lockdown last year. Some 39% of respondents also say they would be comfortable returning to shopping centres, up from 34% in May 2020.

CUSTOMER SERVICE GOES DIGITAL

The role of the store worker has rapidly expanded beyond face-to-face customer service during the pandemic.

With non-essential retail stores closed for much of the past year and online becoming a greater part of the sales mix, retailers including Dixons Carphone, John Lewis & Partners and Liberty have sought to make use of store associates' wealth of product knowledge and interpersonal skills to serve customers virtually.

Launched in April last year, John Lewis' virtual shopping consultations enable customers to be shown around departments including home design, nursery and personal styling on video by an in-store adviser via Zoom. The retailer said during its results update in March that the service has already been used by 11,000 customers since launch.

After a successful trial during the latest national lockdown, which the retailer said generated "hundreds of thousands" of pounds in sales, London department store Liberty is now rolling out a virtual shopping experience that connects online shoppers anywhere in the world with store associates through chat and video consultations. Store associates in its iconic London flagship give product recommendations, share photos and videos and answer detailed questions.

Dixons Carphone's ShopLive service has also proven a hit with shoppers. Launched in March 2020, the service allows customers to speak to staff in store using a video link to get advice and see demonstrations of the products they're interested in from the comfort of their own homes. By the start of October, more than 340,000 customers had been served via ShopLive, driving more than 56,000 sales.

"ShopLive saw the emergence of a new way for customers to shop and a new way for our retail colleagues to provide and share their expert advice," says Dixons Carphone retail director Mike Carslake.

Such initiatives have not just kept the lights on during the pandemic, but have also opened new long-term revenue

streams. Dixons Carphone says ShopLive will remain when trading goes back to normal and presents an opportunity for the business to open 24/7 and even serve international customers.

Such services have also allowed retailers to upskill and make full use of their most important assets – their people – at a time when face-to-face customer service has been severely restricted.

THANK YOU

WAITROSE & PARTNERS,
MARLBOROUGH

"Thank you for keeping the store safe for my elderly grandparents to come and restock their cupboards and fridge. Ensuring there is enough stock there and going above and beyond to help them with their shopping back to their house! Keep up the great work, you're amazing!"

Fran

#YOURCUSTOMERSAYTHANKYOU

THANK YOU

COSTCUTTER, CHESTER-LE-STREET

"Sid and his band of staff are absolutely outstanding, from delivering to the vulnerable to donating to VE Day celebrations at old folks' homes and sourcing the unobtainable. You are a star of the community."

Alison

#YOURCUSTOMERSAYTHANKYOU

THANK YOU

WICKES, CHATHAM

"Thank you for risking your lives to help customers as well as helping the company to continue to trade thereby saving jobs. You too are superstars that should be recognised. Thank you, we appreciate it."

Barb

#YOURCUSTOMERSAYTHANKYOU



EQUIPPING FRONTLINE STAFF FOR SUCCESS



Frontline staff have never been more vital than during the pandemic. As people return to shops, retailers will need to equip store colleagues with the right tools to deliver an outstanding customer experience if they are to rebuild consumer confidence and maximise the return on investment from the store portfolios they operate.

To become true customer champions, frontline staff first need to feel motivated and empowered to make decisions on the shopfloor. Tesco chief operating officer Tony Hoggett says having a strong company purpose that is embedded across the entire organisation is critical to getting the best out of employees.

“We have hundreds of thousands of individuals who are trying to make the best decisions in front of customers every day,” he says. “When you have a really well-trained workforce that is committed to a purpose – to serve our shoppers better every day – when you really have to ask for that little bit more support, you get it.”

Customer interaction management platform Critizr’s CEO and co-founder Nicolas Hammer says customer and employee satisfaction are intrinsically linked and keeping workers motivated is crucial: “There are many ways in which retailers can motivate their frontline staff to engage with customers, including relaying positive customer feedback to them, rewarding them – financially or simply by praising them – and, of course, equipping them with the right tools to make engaging with customers easy and enjoyable.”

Hammer adds that retailers need to foster a mindset among employees that it is everyone’s responsibility within the business to drive customer obsession. This includes frontline staff who are often best equipped to respond quickly to customer feedback.

Decision-making power

Democratisation of decision-making, whereby power is redistributed from the boardroom to the shopfloor, is an emerging retail trend.

For Waterstones, giving store staff responsibility to make decisions on the ground and effectively run the shop like it

is their own has been key to achieving high levels of motivation. Staff at Waterstones are given the power to buy the bulk of the store’s stock and decide what discounts to offer and which events to hold.

Lush also gives store workers “tonnes of power”, according to Hannible. Each store manages its own social media and Google My Business accounts, which dictates what information about the individual shop customers see on these platforms.

Hannible says this makes sense since store staff know what’s going on at a local level: “This was a huge strength during the pandemic. Store staff knew what was happening with tiers and opening hours so could update their customers in real time.”

Lush workers have the power to resolve customer queries however they see fit and the authority to bestow what Lush calls “random acts of kindness” upon shoppers. “It’s a secret thing,” explains Hannible. “If there’s a customer that our staff particularly click with, or seems like they’re having a bad day, they can give them a free gift.”

Digital tools

Technology is becoming an increasingly important part of the shop worker’s toolkit in providing outstanding customer service.

“Colleagues have enjoyed being much more multiskilled and multitasked,

FOUR QUICK WAYS TO EMPOWER STORE ASSOCIATES

1. Give them power over range and discounting decisions.
2. Share positive customer feedback with them.
3. Ask them to manage their store’s social media channels.
4. Introduce a random acts of kindness policy.

and we've introduced all sorts of digital technologies to support them with making sure we make their lives easier on the sales floor so they can spend more time with customers," explains Marks & Spencer stores director Helen Milford.

This includes queuing apps that share detailed product information with colleagues and digital versions of services that store staff weren't able to offer physically during the UK lockdowns, such as bra fitting or kids' shoe sizing. Such tools give staff instant access to the information they need about products and services, enabling them to answer sometimes complex questions without having to seek help from other sources. As a result, they get to spend more time building relationships with their customers.

Critizr's Hammer says that having the power, trust and autonomy to interact personally with customers empowers employees to feel a part of the brand. These customer engagements can solve shopper issues and answer questions, and in the longer term drive transformational change within the business.

The right tools for the job

To derive maximum value from customer feedback, staff must be able to quickly and accurately capture interactions. It is



Colleagues have enjoyed being much more multiskilled

HELEN MILFORD, MARKS & SPENCER



critical, therefore, that retailers equip them with tools that are intuitive and easy to use. Employees should also be properly trained before adopting new customer service tools and technologies.

Webinars can be a useful tool when training large, widely dispersed teams in how to respond effectively to customer feedback. Training can also be made fun; for example, through the use of quizzes that engage staff and demonstrate the importance of delivering an exceptional customer experience.

ROLES THAT EMPOWER FRONTLINE STAFF

Some retailers have created new customer-facing roles that empower staff to deliver exemplary service.

French supermarket giant Carrefour has created new customer relationship and services manager positions to strengthen the company's customer culture.

Early last year, UK supermarket Morrisons decided to cut 3,000 management roles in favour of adding large numbers of shopfloor positions, such as butchers, bakers and fishmongers. Morrisons said the shake-up was designed to improve customer service in stores and staff availability, and would allow department managers to "concentrate on helping frontline colleagues to do their job and run their stores".

Morrisons has also developed roles aimed to better serve the needs of customers. New positions include availability champions, who make sure shelves are well-stocked, and community champions, who work to raise awareness of local charities and causes.

Other new roles have emerged across retail during the pandemic. Retailers including Asda, M&S and John Lewis have introduced greeters at the door who are tasked with explaining new shopping protocols to customers and to reassure those that may feel anxious.

With the pandemic bringing a renewed focus on the relationship between store staff and their customers, we should expect the emergence of more roles that champion the shopper as retailers look to foster a more customer-centric approach.





Lush's Hannible says the company has been doing more online communications with staff during the pandemic.

"We're using Google Hangouts and Jamboards [a virtual whiteboard] to get feedback and opinions so our staff can let us know what they need," she explains. "This means we can create a training course or Q&A really quickly. It's really enabled collaboration and sharing of best practice."

Pets at Home is another company that has turned to new forms of technology to help keep staff engaged during the pandemic. The retailer has created its own 'JAM' digital portal for staff, which chief people and culture officer Louise Stonier says is "a collaborative place where we come together and post videos" to communicate with each other. The chain's 82% happiness score suggests the initiative has been successful in maintaining employee morale.

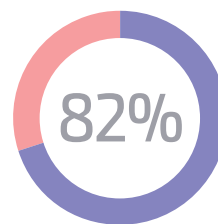
Rewarding staff

Pay has been one area where supermarkets in particular have invested to ensure shopfloor workers feel valued at a time when they are going above and beyond the call of duty to serve customers. Grocers, especially, including Tesco, Sainsbury's, M&S, Aldi, Lidl and Morrisons have boosted pay during the pandemic in recognition of the hard work of their employees.

Morrisons boss Potts has made this pay increase permanent, with every supermarket worker now earning at least £10 an hour: "Our colleagues have earned this new pay deal – and their status as key workers – many times over."



Sainsbury's has also awarded frontline staff a pay rise, as well as bonus payments worth 3% of their annual pay in recognition of their work during the coronavirus crisis. A third lump-sum payment for frontline staff working in stores, as well as logistics and customer Careline teams, will be paid in May, and is worth up to £530 for a full-time employee.



HAPPINESS SCORE ACHIEVED BY PETS AT HOME AFTER IT INTRODUCED A DIGITAL PORTAL FOR STAFF



SECRETS OF SUCCESSFUL STORE MANAGERS

Over the past year, store managers have set the tone for the way in which stores have responded to the needs of their local community during the pandemic.

In good times, as well as times of crisis, a store manager can make the difference between the success and failure of an individual location. One of the greatest responsibilities they have is in shaping the culture of the store they lead.

“We don’t have area managers at Lush,” says Hannible. “The culture is set at a local level from store managers, so every store has its own unique atmosphere and vibe.”

But how can store managers create a customer-obsessed culture in store?

For the Co-op’s Qamar Nawaz, who manages the retailer’s Lees store in Oldham, it is all about leading from the front. Nawaz says he acts as a role model for colleagues

and helps to demonstrate “how to do things the Co-op way”.

Another great example from the past year is highlighted by the actions of Pets at Home store manager Vicky Martin, who assisted an elderly customer who was shielding but needed to purchase food for her dog. Martin checked to see if the items needed were available in her own store and then rang other Pets At Home stores to locate items that were missing. Once she had secured the full list, she rang the customer and offered to collect the items from the other stores and pay for them, and then deliver everything to the customer’s house. The grateful customer left cash in an envelope outside their home.

Celebrating achievements is also important, especially where delivering a fantastic customer experience is concerned.

“It’s been great to see people feel proud of what they’ve achieved and strive for progression,” says Nawaz.

Local knowledge

Store managers have an unparalleled understanding of their customers. By listening to customer feedback and sharing this information with head office colleagues so that it can be acted upon, they have a critical role to play in the overall success of their organisation.

It is vital, too, that concerns and complaints are responded to swiftly.

“It was once acceptable to wait over two days for a response when submitting a review or reporting a problem through a survey, but nowadays customers expect quick responses which address their issue or question,” says Critizr’s

SECRETS TO SUCCESS



Casey Abbott

THE FOOD WAREHOUSE STORE MANAGER, THANET

“As a team, we decided we needed to do something to help the elderly and vulnerable have access to essential goods without the chaos of panic buying. My entire store team stepped up with the support of the local school and taxi firms.

“We liaised with our depot to get the right goods available, along with our direct suppliers such as Warburton’s and Müller. By opening an hour early, we gave our most vulnerable customers the opportunity to get what they needed. My team worked through the night and made early starts to support the effort. We could not have imagined the sheer numbers that turned out.”



Hammer. “Frontline staff need to feel empowered to respond promptly once they have all the key information and context.”

Connecting head office to stores

Store managers act as the conduit between the customer and head office; therefore, it is important they feel empowered to share their on-the-ground knowledge and make suggestions to senior executives.

One of M&S’s big strategic focuses is to “bring back the voice of the store” to move away from the ‘head office knows best’ mentality that it says has crept into the business. Its store managers lead Monday-morning trading feedback calls – which are attended by all commercial executives – where decisions are taken that should be visible across stores by 5pm that day.

M&S also operates a ‘Suggest to Steve’ scheme, which allows all store staff to put suggestions to chief executive Steve Rowe, who responds individually to every idea.

Nawaz says his connection to Co-op head office helps the business to enact swift changes based on customer feedback on the ground: “When lockdown was first announced, we made a proactive effort to ask people how it would affect their daily lives and went above and beyond to make a network in the community. We used our connections in head office to make suggestions based on this.”

It’s also key that store managers have visibility of head-office performance metrics, such as net promoter scores (NPS), so they can view customer feedback that has not been directly communicated at a store

SECRETS TO SUCCESS



Qamar Nawaz

CO-OP FOOD STORE MANAGER, LEES, OLDHAM

“Creating a connection between the team in store and the community has been vital in us creating a great customer experience during the pandemic. It all began with asking honest questions of our customers on ways we could help them during these testing times.

“As a result, we put a focus on raising funds and donating food. So far we’ve raised over £9,000 in funds and donated food worth over £20,000.

“We’ve used our local knowledge to make the store into a local hub, responding to what the community cares about most. When the pandemic first hit, we provided ingredients for a local takeaway, which created 2,000 meals for the community.”

level and take local action to address it. NPS has been an important metric for retailers during the pandemic, since it has given them a tangible measure of customer satisfaction at a time when stores have undergone a raft of changes to keep shoppers safe.

M&S's Milford says that a decision to cut back on "mundane tasks" at the same time as the business introduced new digital customer-service tools enabled staff to spend more time with customers. The retailer's NPS subsequently rose to an all-time high during lockdown.

"Our customers have valued how we've adapted to make sure we have our colleagues in the right place to serve customers," says Milford.

NPS alone has limitations unless frontline staff know how to use the information received via head office. This is why it is so important that frontline staff are able to quickly and effectively capture customer engagements and take local action to address them.

Valuing local knowledge

Many retailers are tapping into the local knowledge store managers have and devolving decision-making powers to them.

Richer Sounds operations director John Clayton says store managers "know and understand what the company's ethos is, what we are trying to achieve and who we are as a brand, but they also have in-depth knowledge of their local demographics and customers and the local competition".

If a Richer Sounds store manager and their team see sales skewed towards audio products rather than TVs, they are actively encouraged to adapt ranges to reflect this, Clayton says.

Waterstones' Taylor agrees that those on the ground often know best: "Booksellers are speaking to customers on a day-to-day basis; they know what they want and what's selling.

"We get our shops running themselves and, to all intents and purposes, it's the store manager's name above the door. They see themselves as independents, but under a chain banner."

SECRETS TO SUCCESS



Vicky Martin

PETS AT HOME STORE MANAGER, GRANTHAM

"Customer feedback is of utmost importance and I ensure that this is constantly assessed – whether reinforcing positive comments and ensuring that they are maintained or coming up with creative solutions to resolve any negative feelings a customer may have when in store.

"As a store, we are empowered to ensure that our customers leave feeling happy and that their feedback, whether positive or negative, is taken seriously through listening, empathising and asking questions to resolve the problem and doing whatever we can to come to a solution.

"We have a customer service report system where customers can leave feedback about the service they have received, whether positive or negative. I share all comments with colleagues and assess where things may have gone wrong, and put actions in place to prevent the same issues from recurring."



CELEBRATING THE CX CHAMPIONS





Many retailers from around the world have built a reputation for delivering an outstanding customer experience through the interactions of their frontline staff. Others have made it a strategic priority to put customer service at the heart of their brand proposition as we emerge from the coronavirus pandemic.

In this chapter, we profile five retailers that view their employees as their greatest customer champions: from French beauty giant Sephora, whose teams of expert consultants and beauty professionals are so integral to its beauty hall experience, to John Lewis Partnership – arguably the UK retailer most synonymous with great customer service.

Company culture, training, rewards and incentives are all critical to ensuring a retailer's employees deliver an outstanding level of service. Memorable human interactions can also boost shopper satisfaction, which in turn can drive sales and long-term loyalty and retention. As high streets and shopping centres reopen this summer, motivating and empowering employees will be key in helping customers rediscover the joy of physical retail.

Retailers have an opportunity to bring excitement back to the act of shopping by becoming truly 'customer-obsessed' in a way that leverages the skills, knowledge and enthusiasm of their store teams. In their different ways, each of our case studies demonstrates why frontline staff really can be a retailer's CX secret weapon.



Memorable human interactions can boost shopper satisfaction



CASE STUDY I

JOHN LEWIS PARTNERSHIP

John Lewis Partnership (JLP) is synonymous with customer service excellence across its John Lewis & Partners and Waitrose & Partners brands, which the retailer views as a unique selling point.

Its ownership structure, whereby all staff members are partners that own the business and are usually rewarded an annual bonus based on its financial performance, helps to unite partners behind the goal of delivering the very best customer service.

JLP believes that the millions of individual decisions taken by partners on the shopfloor combine to create a great customer experience, which, in turn, drives its commercial success.

Frontline staff are encouraged to make decisions with the customer in mind without having to seek approval from above.

Retaining customer trust is paramount to JLP's success: it is not unknown for partners to give customers advice on products it does not stock and

point them in the direction of another retailer. The retailer's 'never knowingly undersold' price promise also gives customers confidence that staff are acting in their best interest.

Great customer experience goes beyond just product advice. John Lewis places a big focus on the wider in-store experience and offers free events, masterclasses and training on subjects such as technology, and a concierge-style service.

Staff have even been trained by theatre actors to beef up their service credentials.

JLP's next challenge is to replicate its fantastic service in a digital setting. The retailer is planning to invest further to make sure its online service is on par with that of stores. It said in October: "First-class customer service delivered by partners is our unique strength. We know it's not always been as easy as it should be to shop with us, so we're first investing to deliver a fantastic experience – online, on the phone and in store."



We're investing to deliver a fantastic experience

JOHN LEWIS PARTNERSHIP



CASE STUDY 2



WATERSTONES

Bookshop Waterstones differentiates itself from online rivals by offering specialist advice and book recommendations from well-read, knowledgeable staff.

The retailer tends to employ book lovers – many of its store staff are English literature students or graduates, says retail director Luke Taylor, himself an English graduate who started his career in a Waterstones store.

“We can train people on the operational stuff easily,” he says. “When we’re inducting people, it’s all on books and book knowledge.”

Waterstones staff are encouraged to speak to customers and find out what they are interested in by asking what book they last read.

Staff not only give one-to-one advice on titles, but also make personal recommendations

via in-store displays that list their favourite books and the reasons they love them.

The retailer takes a very local approach and shop managers are given responsibility for ordering the bulk of store stock based on their knowledge of their customer base.

Since chief executive James Daunt, the owner of much-loved bookshop Daunt Books, took over the running of Waterstones in 2011, the retailer has focused on making each store feel like an independent.

“Before James Daunt took over, everything we did was centralised,” says Taylor. “All stores were planogrammed and every store, from Hampstead to Hastings, was identical, which was totally insane.”

Since then, Waterstones has cut out many middle-manager roles and given more control to

store managers, Taylor explains: “Middle managers kept wanting reports and central control, whereas the booksellers are the ones that actually know what’s going on on the ground.”

“That’s key to us giving the independent spirit back to booksellers. They know what customers want and what’s selling, so it’s up to them to determine the ranges and make sure they reflect their local markets.”

Waterstones handsomely rewards its very best store staff. “People are rewarded by virtue of being great booksellers,” says Taylor. “Our best booksellers will earn more than our managers. We reward people and not roles. We want to make sure we’re rewarding and retaining those who don’t want to move through the hierarchy, but want to spend their lives talking to customers and selling books.”

CASE STUDY 3

KINGFISHER

Under chief executive Thierry Garnier, Kingfisher is in the process of building a mobile-first, service-orientated customer experience that uses its store assets, including its people, as the foundation. The move forms part of the retail group's new Powered by Kingfisher strategy and reflects a belief that the role of the store is integral to long-term success in retail.

Kingfisher admits that, in recent years, it had become complex and product-led, rather than retail-led, which resulted in it losing its all-important customer focus.

The new plan recognises that the group's 1,350-plus stores – including Screwfix, B&Q and Castorama – are key to delivering a seamless customer experience, whether goods are purchased in store, via click and collect or for home delivery.

Kingfisher customers use its stores for inspiration and visualisation, as well as for expert advice from staff on the shopfloor, and, going forward, the business intends to provide

customers with a more compelling and complete offer, including in-store services such as paint mixing and timber cutting.

Recognising the importance of its frontline employees to delivering its plan, Kingfisher announced in September that colleagues would be given the opportunity to share in the group's future success. Under the 'I+I Sharing in Our Future' plan, every one of its 77,000 staff will be given the opportunity to become a shareholder. Every share bought by employees will be matched by Kingfisher on a one-for-one basis.

"As a retailer with over a thousand stores, our 77,000 colleagues are the driving force of our business," says Garnier. "They work every day to look after our customers, whether they are working in stores or in our head offices.

"We have just launched a new strategic plan at Kingfisher and we now want to give all our colleagues the opportunity to be part of that plan as shareholders and share in our collective future."

“
Our colleagues
are the driving
force of our
business”

THIERRY GARNIER, KINGFISHER



CASE STUDY 4



ATOL LES OPTICIENS

Atol, the French co-operative chain of opticians, has put its store associates at the centre of its vision to generate an emotional connection with its customers by listening to their feedback and acting upon it.

Historically, the company collected feedback via a questionnaire sent to customers, but the tool was rarely used by store associates and tended only to capture negative reviews.

Atol made the decision to trust frontline staff to manage their store's customer reviews. It has worked with Critizr to provide tools that offer employees full access and visibility over what is being said about their stores, but also the ability to respond directly and engage in personalised

conversations with their customers.

Customer feedback is now captured in store via smartphone, which subsequently becomes an additional point of contact post-purchase.

"Everything we put in place at the head office must serve the associates; the customers shop in their stores and they are the ones who can really take action if, for example, someone has an issue," explains Atol chief executive Eric Plat.

Although the response from associates was generally positive, Atol had to overcome some resistance, including a perceived lack of time to deal with customer reviews and the idea that there was no need for a dedicated customer feedback tool because local staff already had strong knowledge of customers.

Associates each received training on how to use the tool and manage and respond to customer feedback, resulting in a stronger link between the stores and their customers, and driving a culture of customer obsession across the brand.

The manager of the Atol Les Opticiens store in Lille, Nicolas Pauchet, shares an example of how receiving direct customer feedback turned a negative customer review into a positive: "A client who did not dare tell us in person that the glasses she received were unsuitable did so by submitting a notice through the Critizr platform. We immediately offered to re-examine her and correct her glasses. The client subsequently modified her comment to thank us for our professionalism."

CASE STUDY 5



SEPHORA

French beauty giant Sephora's teams of expert consultants and beauty professionals are at the heart of the retailer's compelling beauty hall experience.

A pioneer of experiential retail, Sephora creates beauty 'playgrounds' where customers are encouraged to immerse themselves in its range of beauty products and seek tips and advice from its expert, impartial and enthusiastic staff.

The retailer allows customers to experiment with products in store and offers personalised beauty services and classes including make-up lessons, as well as an interactive face chart that helps people to find customised products and application methods. Its ATAWAD (any time, anywhere on any device) strategy means frontline staff are also able to offer personalised advice to customers on any digital device.

The coronavirus pandemic led to the closure of the majority of Sephora stores for several months.

To try to maintain the core elements of the customer experience, the retailer's reopened stores in France have featured plastic coverings over make-up display units to ensure samples are not contaminated by staff. Any product a shopper wants to test is cleaned beforehand and afterwards by a staff member.

The service offered by frontline employees is a key driver of brand loyalty and plays a central role in the company's Sephora Beauty Insider loyalty scheme. The programme has three tiers – Insider, VIB (Very Important Beauty-insider) and Rouge – and customers are able to move up a tier if they spend more with the retailer.

Points can be redeemed at the Sephora Rewards Bazaar, online and in store, for free sample products, Sephora-themed novelty items and beauty experiences delivered by the shop's experts, including make-up classes.



Sephora creates beauty 'playgrounds' for its customers



5 WAYS TO TURN YOUR FRONTLINE STAFF INTO CUSTOMER CHAMPIONS



1. GIVE STAFF THE FREEDOM TO OFFER A BESPOKE SERVICE

Empowering staff to provide a truly personalised service can increase motivation and lead to high levels of customer satisfaction.



2. REWARD CUSTOMER SERVICE EXCELLENCE

Give careful thought to how you reward frontline staff in terms of both their pay and other benefits. If employees feel they are being recognised and rewarded for their efforts, they will be motivated to deliver outstanding customer service.



3. EQUIP STAFF WITH THE RIGHT TOOLS

It is vital that employees feel confident in using new tools and technologies for capturing customer feedback, whatever form it takes. Investment in training is key.



4. GIVE STORE MANAGERS DECISION-MAKING POWER

Never underestimate the power of local knowledge. Your business could benefit from giving store managers more of a say on key decisions such as range, price and strategy.



5. MAKE IT EASY TO COMMUNICATE WITH HEAD OFFICE

Information should flow seamlessly between stores and head office. Frontline workers should feel that their feedback is being listened to and acted upon.



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