

HAPPY EMPLOYEES MAKE HAPPY CUSTOMERS

5 tips for deploying technology that will have a positive impact on your retail operation.



INTRODUCTION

Here's a hint: Listening to your employees may be the straightest path to meeting customer expectations.

Headsets. Tablets. Scanners. Cell phones. For retailers, determining which technologies and devices to deploy for employees can be dizzying. Often, discussions begin when a retailer is trying to improve its ability to meet customer demands; that never-ending quest to be faster, easier, and more convenient.

One overlooked aspect of deploying technology is how it can be used to improve employee satisfaction. According to CompuCom, “workplace happiness is increasingly determined by technology. Happiness raises nearly every business outcome: boosting sales by 37% and productivity by 31%. In retail sales, success leads to job satisfaction. Happy employees make happy customers.”

An investment in the right technology not only enables employees to do their jobs better, but also demonstrates a level of commitment to them and their success. It makes them feel valued. Of course, deploying the wrong technology or sitting on old and outdated technology can be detrimental.

How can a retailer determine which technologies and devices to deploy for its employees? One option: ask them.

“Listen to your employees,” says Lynn Loignon, Communications Consultant and former VP of Internal Communications for Kohl’s. “Retailers do a really great job of listening to their customers. What they don’t do as well is listening to their employees. If you want to know the obstacles and issues your employees face, then ask them. They’ll help you solve the problems by telling you, ‘This is what I need. This is what I don’t have right now.’ Combine that insight with what your customers are saying to find your solution.”

Ernie Evangelista, Kohl’s Senior Manager of Internal Communications agrees, “Start by listening to your employees. Sit one-on-one with them, conduct focus groups, do your homework upfront.” In doing that, he says, a retailer will begin to identify common themes. Top problems will emerge. Those are the priorities a retailer should strive to solve through the application of technology.

Along with the answers your employees may share or the themes you hear, these five tips can help guide your efforts as you explore any type of new technology-based solution.

1. Solve a Problem

The pressure for retailers to stay competitive and evolve their operations can prompt a seemingly endless stream of decisions.

“There will always be a new way of doing something, a shinier way to accomplish a task. The hardest part is not reacting too quickly, not introducing something new just for the sake of it. Instead, introduce a new technology because it’s going to solve a problem, or convey an idea that will lead to action,” Mr. Evangelista says.

One common challenge is keeping employees up-to-date on products.



“Customers expect that employees will know more than they do about products. But that may not be realistic. Customers are doing their research, looking at reviews, and the company’s website. They walk into the store with a certain level of knowledge,” Ms. Loignon says. “They have the expectation that it’s going to be simple to get the product they want at the price they want. And they expect that the employees will help and provide additional information.”

Training employees may take several different forms, such as providing access to product videos, webinars, or online demonstrations. Retailers may choose to create the training content themselves, so it has a branded look and feel, or they may leverage manufacturer-provided materials. Regardless, it will likely require a strategic approach with multiple solutions.

“You won’t solve it all with one technology. It’s more about a plotting a roadmap for where you want to go,” she says.

At the same time, recognize that solving one problem may cause another.

“When you introduce something new, you have to consider other problems you might be causing,” Mr. Evangelista warns. “To accomplish this, we introduced a centralized digital team dedicated to working through all the issues related to how a solution fits within the corporate technology ecosystem. Since the team interacts with all areas of the company, it can recognize when one department is having a problem that another department might be trying to solve. They can proactively spot problems and assist in sharing information to integrate the efforts. Additionally, they focus less on a technology’s specific features and functionality and more on creating an overall positive user experience, which in turn shapes many of the team’s decisions.”



Forbes Magazine reported that “showing new hires their development matters will make them less likely to move on to another company, and this gives the employer a competitive edge.”

2. Out with the Old, In with the New

It can be a struggle for retailers—and employees—to transition away from legacy technologies and previous investments.

“As companies tack on new technologies year after year, it gets cumbersome. Maybe they will have a portal that provides access to everything. But employees won’t understand where to go, how to find something,” says Mr. Evangelista. “As you add new solutions, it’s equally important to decide what can go away. You need to identify what’s no longer relevant.”

That starts by asking whether it’s worth keeping an old tool or technology in the mix. Is there a risk that employees will continue with their old ways and habits? Or, that the old tool will divert attention away from the new solution?

“For these reasons, we’ve developed ‘sunsetting’ strategies with our rollouts to ensure that there is a clear understanding of how all technologies fit together, and when any should be updated, replaced, or retired altogether,” he says.

According to CompuCom, people who work with outdated technology “feel less productive, and are **750%** more likely to be frustrated and **450%** more likely to want to quit.”



3. Make it Feel Like Home

It wasn't long ago that a gap existed between technologies used at work and those used at home; when only businesses could afford powerful computing. That gap reduced significantly with smartphones, which essentially reversed the trend. When considering new technologies in a work environment today, retailers are well-advised to make it feel like home.

"To engage sales associates, especially those on the younger end, like Millennials and Gen Xers, you have to give them the types of technology experiences they're used to at home, in their own time," says Alan Langford, Director of Broadcast & Media Productions at JCPenney. That means allowing them to take in information from a variety of ways.

"No one gets all of their information from their TV, or mobile device, or laptop," he says. "You have to have a blended approach." For training initiatives, this is key.



"If you don't keep them trained on products and skills, you pay the price by not bringing in customers," he says. And it's not just an issue of deploying solutions across multiple devices. It's also a matter of creating intuitive experiences on those devices.

"When thinking about core technology, think about the user experience your employees will have. You can mimic the design approach that employees are familiar with. That helps them understand what to do, how to navigate. It makes life easier for them and helps you to explain why you're making a choice in a certain platform or technology," says Luke Mueller, Senior Internal Communications Platform Specialist at Thomson Reuters.

4. Eliminate Barriers

Equally critical is to address the issue of access. Retailers often try to solve these issues by providing associates with devices or determining how to allow employees to use their own.

There are pros and cons to both approaches. For example, providing devices is costly, which is why retailers often don't invest in the best equipment. Yet relying on employee devices carries security risks and problems associated with data plans.

"When developing our approach to making product and training content available, we knew not all employees would have a device, or that many would be on a limited data plan. So, we worked on a balanced approach. If an employee had a device they wanted to bring they could use it. If they did not, we would provide a device," recalls Ms. Loignon.

"We were committed to thinking through the big picture and how everything was connected. Our goal was to make information accessible and to keep it safe," she says. The strategy involved placing training and product content behind a secure Web-based portal.

The team developed processes and policies to support both scenarios, with compliance measures to ensure security. Today, employees are only allowed to use the provided device within the building. For those who bring their own, the company reimburses data-related expenses.

"They like using their own devices better, because they know how to find information easily. And, they have the time to figure out the Web-based app and to play with it," she says.

"The beauty of a Web-based app is that it is more device agnostic. Employees are able to use whatever device they prefer, and they don't have to be tied to a specific device or carry anything extra," says Mr. Evangelista.

Beyond being able to view content through handheld devices, many retailers disseminate information through other channels, including posting videos and product-related factoids on digital breakroom TVs. Offering content on a variety of devices solves the problem associated with time and the question of when associates should participate in training.

"When we have to take associates off the floor it costs money," Mr. Langford of JCPenney explains. "Making the training available through a host of different devices means they can take training on the sales floor itself. Creatively, we try to make training videos as short as possible. We ask ourselves, can we do it in 3 minutes instead of 15?"



Most associates work in one or two departments only. Rather than overwhelming sales associates with information on the thousands of products available in a store, they are served brand or product-specific training by their assigned department. Shoe department associates see videos for Nike and Adidas, for example.

“We focused on short videos because that’s what employees are doing in their personal lives,” Ms. Loignon says. “Those 60-second videos give them enough information so they can comfortably talk to the customer.” The company has built an impressive catalogue of videos using both original and manufacturer-supplied content.



Today, according to a survey conducted by Jamf, more than half of enterprise organizations (52%) allow employees to choose what type of computer they use at work, while nearly half (49%) allow them to choose their mobile devices.

They also found that “regardless of the company when employees are given the technology they want, employers are rewarded with the best, most productive and appreciative employees.”

5. Improve Along the Way

Since technology changes so quickly, retailers may be reluctant to make the investment today, preferring to wait to see what might be around the corner.

“When it comes to technology, dive in as soon as you can,” Mr. Langford advises. “There will never be a perfect solution.”

Ms. Loignon agrees. “With the first deployment, you might learn from it. You won’t get it perfect. But if you can get good, or get close, you can do something to enhance it and make it better. Think about Apple, they don’t get it perfect the first time. They are constantly releasing updates to improve or enhance their products.”

Use the powerful backend analytics available with most platforms to drive those incremental improvements.

“In our Learning Management System, we can see how many associates watched a video. We know how often it was watched. For each video, we can see within a timeline if a viewer aborted at two minutes. We can identify exactly where viewership dropped off. We use that to inform future decisions. If no one is watching it, or watching all of it, we get rid of it,” he says.

The data enables the JCPenney team to continually evaluate and optimize content, so their catalogue remains useful and free of irrelevant or uninteresting material. Data-driven insights can also be shared with executive leadership to demonstrate return on investment and support strategic decisions.

And of course, perhaps the greatest source of feedback regarding any technology deployment will be to circle back around to ask employees what their thoughts might be. As we’ve seen, listening to employees and deploying technologies to meet their needs will mean happier employees... and even happier customers.

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