

Insights, News & Events

HANDLING THE RETAIL STRAIN: TRAINING IS CRITICAL

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Retail employees have done as much as anyone in responding to the needs of the country created by the pandemic. Simply coming to work and doing their jobs has been an invaluable service to society. As the pandemic restrictions go into their eighth month, the nations' mental health is on a decline and tempers remain hot. YouTube and other social media sites are now full of videos of customers assaulting retail workers. No one knows when a customer may have a breakdown in a store and scream or curse at employees or worse. Adding fuel to the fire is the breakout of race relations issues throughout the country creating a growing tension among people of different races. While incidents of actual violence are probably rare in comparison to the number of employee customer interactions, the cost of a single incident in terms of damages to the employee and damage to the reputation of the employer is extremely high. Given this environment, retailers should take a fresh look at their employee training on customer service and make sure that it covers handling unruly customers.

WHAT EMPLOYEES NEED TO KNOW

Employers should provide employees with a set of protocols, much as they often do for suspected shoplifting or managing an upset customer. Employees must know what they can and cannot do in response to a situation. For example, can they politely ask the customer to leave the store or can that request be made only by a manager? Does the employee have any authority to offer some form of compensation to assuage the customer? Should the matter

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the customer is raising be sent to a higher level of management or a different department?

DE-ESCALATION IS CRUCIAL

Employees should be trained in de-escalation techniques. These principles have primarily been used in the mental health field with employees who work with mentally ill patients. Using them requires an individual have strong control over his own emotions. Common aspects among these principles address personal space, body language, tone, listening, and offering solutions.

Most unruly customers can be calmed when approached the right way. Some people have an innate ability to be empathetic and can naturally defuse tensions, but many cannot. De-escalating a potentially violent situation requires knowledge of how to respond. An employee who has not been taught appropriate customer interaction may well not recognize the situation and make it worse.

PHYSICAL CONTACT IS NOT RECOMMENDED

“Do not touch” is an incredibly important lesson. When dealing with an upset child, holding, hugging, and other physical acts are often used to help them regain control. Some people’s natural reaction to an upset individual is to pat their arm or shoulder. Employees must understand that if they put their hands on a customer, even in a gentle manner, doing so can result in a host of claims including their being personally sued for battery.

IS THE CUSTOMER ALWAYS RIGHT?

Customers become angry when an employee refuses a request that would violate store policy or is requesting the customer do something they do not want to. Employees must have a firm grasp of company’s requirements of customers because inconsistently enforcing the employer’s rules is a recipe for conflict. For example, if a store chooses to require masks, employees must know that. Customers who were allowed to shop without a mask by a different employee will feel empowered to ignore the requirement if another employee tries to enforce it.

DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION TRAINING IS A KEY COMPONENT

It is also important to include training on diversity so that employees understand how their conduct comes across to others. Employees may honestly not know or understand how their words could be perceived as offensive.

TRAIN YOUR WORKFORCE

Employees need to know the resources available to assist them in situations where they do not feel comfortable. They must understand who among the team members, normally management, can assist them with uncomfortable situations and how to properly hand off a customer. They need to understand when to involve law enforcement. Most importantly, they need to understand the signs that a situation is escalating and that they need the help.

Employers can assist their employees in other ways. Rules and requirements that employees are expected to enforce should be prominently displayed in signs at the entrance and other places in the store. For example, if there are no signs notifying customers that they must wear a mask to shop, they are less likely to respond to the request of an employee asking them to don a mask.

Other rules that could help avoid conflicts may include instructions such as not commenting on a customer's clothing. You might consider training your workers not to comment on political slogans, customer clothing, a customer's appearance, or items the customer purchases.

Employers should also train employees on customer conduct, such as sexual harassment, that is not tolerated. Employees often do not understand that stores have the right to refuse service to customers behaving badly. They need to be empowered to bring customer misconduct to the attention of management.

The problem with training is that if people leave a class or the computer and do not immediately put the information they learned into action, it is largely forgotten. One study showed individuals retained only 10% of what they learned in a class a week later. Management needs to regularly remind employees of the training and the techniques.

WRAP UP

No store wants to be on the local news because a fight broke out over a mask requirement. No store wants to be on the receiving end of a lawsuit accusing an employee of battery when they were trying to escort someone from the premises. No store wants its employees to be or feel threatened or suffer harm. Achieving those goals does not happen by accident. Employers who train their employees to manage tense situations will be in a better position to avoid such conflicts.

For more information, [contact the author here](#).