

# Good customer relations require more than a smile

Everyone dislikes being in a store where they have to go hunting for someone to answer their question. Conversely, they also dislike being pestered by salespeople as they browse the new releases at an electronics store.

The store's owner must consider the location, traffic flow, and type of store when deciding on staff levels.

For every store whether it sells knick-knacks or groceries, hardware or electronics, there are two pitfalls when it comes to service — having too little or too many service staff.

In a competitive environment it can be difficult for stores to maintain a profit says Bill Law-

son, a business professor at Carleton University. He says that some stores may have little or no staff on the floor but have a good return policy.

If there are too few staff, a customer trying to decide between two similar products will not be able to find anyone to respond to their questions. If this occurs, the customer is likely to either choose one and hope it is correct, or put both down and come back after doing research. If staff had been available the store would have been assured of a sale. Not having sufficient staff hinders a store's ability to build a loyal customer base.

Having too many employees can be just as damaging. For ex-



**BUSINESS BEAT**  
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ample, some stores seem to have a staff member in every aisle. In others, where staff are paid on commission, extra staff will pester customers who are browsing. Such customers dislike being bugged by service staff hovering like bees in their brightly coloured vests.

Customers can normally rid themselves of hovering service personnel by saying they are browsing and will look for staff members if they have questions.

Lawson says hardware and electronic stores have more staff because they are selling complex items and staff should be available to answer questions.

He adds there may be a link between increased staff levels and theft prevention but he has not read any studies on the subject. Lawson suggests owners track the fit to see if changes to the number of staff can prevent these losses.

A store can improve its service while avoiding these pitfalls by monitoring customer patterns. If a store is busy in the afternoon but quiet in the morning, then perhaps the owners should consider having fewer staff in the morning or opening later.

Another way to improve service is to ensure there is someone who can be on call if the store is extra busy.

Customers can help business by commenting on service either through complaints and/or praise as the situation warrants.

Lawson says adjusting service levels may be beneficial but most small business owners do not have the time to study if changes are needed.

Finding the right amount of service staff in a store need not be difficult; it merely requires some time. Owners can be assured that customers, who can find someone to ask if they need help but are not pestered, will most likely be repeat customers.