


by Katie Roberts

You're the Coach



* Build Value
* Listen!
* Be Sensible

Empower and energize your staff with solid management methods.

Your main job as sales manager is to serve as coach to a staff of team players.

As the sales manager in a bridal store, you wear dozens of hats and have hundreds of responsibilities – some large, some small. Caught up in the urge to do it all, far too many of us easily slip into the habit of being more of a micro-manger than a sales manager. The bad news: This is a completely inefficient way to do your job. The good news: There are ways to rectify this common pitfall.

Start by looking at your title and role. Your main job as sales manager, no matter how cliché it sounds, is to serve as coach to a staff of team players. You need a select set of skills to play out this role effectively. In paying attention to your managerial behavior and making the necessary changes,

you'll find great rewards. Your newly polished, savvy skills will enable you to maintain better control of your store and staff, as well as empower your team to perform in a more independent, profitable way. It's a win-win for all involved, and VOWS: is willing to wager that you'll appreciate this bonus point: Your job could be significantly less stressful. Any takers? Read on for highlights on developing your role as a sales manager using the 'coach approach.'

Empower Your Staff For Better Retail Results

When using the coach approach, you're striving to eventually empower your staff. But this empowerment, unless

you're dealing with a very seasoned employee, comes only after a period of control during which you're teaching fundamental selling skills, establishing accountability and building personal confidence. Lee Froschheiser, CEO and chairman of the Southern California-based consulting firm Management Action Programs (www.map-consulting.com), uses a metaphorical empowerment pendulum tool to determine where managers stand on their own ability to control versus empower employees. Explained in his book, "Vital Factors" (John Wiley & Son's, 2007), the sales manager will access where each employee falls on the pendulum,

Continued on page 72

Continued from page 68

then make necessary adjustments.

"As the manager, I am watching them make the sales presentation and will maybe jump in when they're failing to get them to the empowerment side," he says. "This is done by offering feedback and even sometimes letting them fail because that's one way that people learn is by failures. But as they gain more experience, they gain more confidence. Then I gain more confidence in them and they go more toward the empowerment side."

Tonya Gosselin, sales manager of the Burlington, Vt.-based Needleman's Bride & Formals, has benefited from the fruits of growing empowerment in her store. She takes a coach approach and steps in to help consultants when a special situation arises, such as trying to please an impossible customer. In addition, if Gosselin notes a mishandled sale, she'll usually address it at a later time if it's not too serious. However, being in a smaller store, Gosselin must be on the floor in

Continued on page 76

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Mistakes We Managers Make

- **Taking over a sale that's going well.** Whether out of boredom or because you're a self-confessed control freak, you might have butted in unnecessarily. How do you know? Watch for non-verbal signs exhibited on the part of either your consultant or the customer, says Lee Froschheiser, CEO and chairman of the Southern California-based consulting firm, Management Action Programs (www.mapconsulting.com). If facial expressions or body language indicate they're withdrawing from you, that's your exit cue. Or, "if you see a customer really relating to the salesperson and not relating to you, step back," he says.

Tina Minshall of Bridal and Formal Inc. in Cincinnati discretely uses store mirrors to watch body language. She's often observed a selling situation from a nearby mirror, especially when she and the consultant are not immediately present, and learned whether or not she needs to be involved.

"Customers let their guard down when they don't think anyone is watching them. Facial expressions are a dead giveaway," Minshall says.

- **Making – and stating – assumptions.** Never charge into a selling situation and voice opinions, Minshall says. The consultant has built a relationship with the bride and you don't want to contradict what's been established.

"If you offer another opinion about the dress, it can confuse the whole sale. So if you come into the scene, start with a question like, 'Is this your favorite?'" Minshall suggests.

- **Treating customers differently.** If your consultants are outfitting the governor's daughter for her wedding, it's easy to get wrapped up in this 'celebrity' bride. But it's a manager's job to ensure other customers are receiving their fair share of attention as well. (This also happens in the case of a bride who is accompanied by a large, loud entourage versus another who brings only her mother). "Try to balance everything out and create the same level of excitement for one as you do for another," Minshall says.

- **Forcing your approach into the selling process.** "One thing that happens with sales managers is they don't see that someone else might get the sale differently than they would," Froschheiser says. "They've got to realize there are other ways than their method. Their job is to develop and train people, not to do their job for them."

- **Correcting the consultant during the sale.** "Never correct something in front of the customer," Minshall says. Address mistakes in private, and consider when and how you deliver the news. "If you interrupt the salesperson in the middle of the day, you will destroy her sale, and she won't be able to focus. We try to wait until the end of the day."

- **Not communicating reasons for helping out a sale.** If you do step in with unsolicited support, later explain your reasons for doing so to your consultant. If you don't, your employee might resent your seemingly controlling behavior.

"I have felt that at times that would be the case if I didn't address it, so I always say, 'The reason I gave my two cents was. . .,'" says Tonya Gosselin, sales manager of the Burlington, Vt.-based Needleman's Bride & Formals. "I head that off so I don't have to have a more uncomfortable conversation later."

- **Allowing secrets in the workplace.** Manager-consultant communication is a two-way street.

"Secrets stink," says Barbara Sanfilippo, owner of Romano-Sanfilippo (www.barbara-sanfilippo.com), a San Diego-based motivational speaker and business coach who specializes in sales management and consultative selling. Not only do sales managers need to communicate expectations, but consultants should, too. Sanfilippo says they should verbally express their feelings saying: "Here's how I like to be managed and led, here's what I need, tell me what you need, and let's make sure we can partner together." A good sales manager will encourage that in a consultant. 

Continued from page 72

a selling role, not just acting as the boss. Empowering her staff has been a necessary good, enabling her to wear the hat of both manager and sales person.

"It has gotten easier as our staff has matured in their sales abilities," she says. "The don't rely on me as much, so I can be more involved with a bride myself."

Three More Coaching Skills: Train, Motivate and Challenge

As mentioned, the coach approach lends itself to a greater number of employees feeling empowered. But what else should a coach do to reach this goal? In addition to providing constructive feedback, letting employees occasionally learn lessons the hard way and fostering a culture of valuable selling experience, the coach must provide support through product and service training. This is done through regular meetings, in which these topics are thoroughly discussed.



"For anyone selling a product, the more they know about the product and the important questions that you know a customer is going to ask, the easier it is for them to make the sale," says Barbara Sanfilippo, owner of Romano-Sanfilippo (www.barbara-sanfilippo.com), a San Diego-based motivational speaker and business coach who specializes in sales management and consultative selling. She says training works best when it's scheduled weekly and includes topics relating to "product features, benefits to the customer, sales cues and opportunities, open-probing questions and typical objections. Providing technical information alone is not enough – your people need the sales information."

For larger stores, in which there are hundreds – maybe thousands – of gowns, it's unreasonable to expect your staff to memorize all the details. That's where sales managers can really help, according to Tina Minshall, who has extensive experience managing Bridal and Formal Inc. in Cincinnati. Managers provide support by greeting customers at the front desk, working the dressing rooms and monitoring store activity. Always being in the midst of the action enables them to answer specific questions or concerns beyond the typical realm of consultant knowledge.

"Brides just want to feel relaxed, calm and not pressured," Minshall says. "The manager's presence reinforces that - not that the salesperson doesn't know what she's doing, but it just adds that extra level of comfort to the sale and reinforces that they're getting something

special."

Sanfilippo says that in other businesses, specific parts of the sale might actually be taken over by a transaction coordinator,

who would be proficient in shipping or delivery details, for example. However, in the bridal business, a manager would play this part, and again, this often builds a bride's confidence in the store and its services, Minshall says.

A good sales coach will also strive to inspire and motivate consultants. Often underestimated, simple verbal praise is a zero-cost way to encourage a team member in a selling situation, even when there aren't any results.

"It's important, as a coach, to say things like, 'You've made some mistakes and might not have gotten the sale, but here's what you did right,'" Froschheiser says. "That's being an encouraging person, and if I had to sum it up, that's what a sales manager should do."

Finally, a great coach is a teacher who is there to instruct and demonstrate examples, such as through role-playing exercises, as well as challenge consultants. This is where holding employees accountable for mistakes (or achievements) comes into play, at which point it's the coach's responsibility to help staffers understand the consequences of their actions, or lack thereof.

Asking consultants probing questions – and not giving them the answers – also challenges and empowers them by requiring them to find solutions themselves, Froschheiser says. It can be tough, but not always jumping in to save the sale is better for the employee's growth. Always support this behavior by following up and asking them to determine why the sale failed. Let the consultant provide the answers for future success, he says.

To challenge, motivate and empower consultants, Sanfilippo offers a very specific method for measuring and tracking employee performance. With your staff, create an "ideal customer-service check-

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list, and get their buy in on what should be on the list," she says.

Items might be: Did you acknowledge the customer in a warm, friendly way? Did you ask open-ended questions? Did you demonstrate good listening skills? Did you present product benefits? Did you handle concerns/objections well? Did you gently up sell? Then, regularly yet randomly pick a consultant, sit down together, and ask her to review the list, assessing her strengths and weaknesses in regard to a particular sale.

"Tell them you're going to be quiet, and ask them to tell you what they did best and what they can improve on," she says. "Doing this means that they're consciously becoming aware."

You can then ask or (if they're drawing a blank) make suggestions for improvement in weak areas. Once you've agreed on solutions, schedule a follow-up session for a couple of weeks later to re-evaluate the progress, Sanfilippo says. For larger stores with more than one manager or where the manager doesn't share the storeowner title, those reports should be handed into the boss periodically.

Take an Olympic Angle To Your Coach Approach

To be a first-rate sales manager, you've got to step back eventually, let your consultants make their plays and then provide the feedback, motivation and training they need. You also must have confidence in your abilities, not just your staff's, and trust in this newfound coach approach. You might not win a popularity contest when first implementing the change, but eventually your staff should respect you more than ever.

"Just like an Olympic coach, you have a job to make them the best Olympic bridal consultants they can be," Sanfilippo says. Following a specific, professional method shows that you respect your employees' abilities and everyone's time. It also eventually makes your job easier, as you will find more free time to do other tasks.

So when you're taking the coach approach, think of yourself as leader of an Olympic team, one that's empowered to sell to its greatest potential. Then go for the gold!

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