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Coaching retailers for better business

Q&A with Alf Dunbar

Melissa Kvidahl | Natural Foods Merchandiser

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Take it from Alf Dunbar, Natural Products Expo East speaker whose business was on the verge of bankruptcy when he turned it around to see some serious revenue—positivity and customer service are far from overrated.



Q&A

ALF DUNBAR

Alf Dunbar is the author of *Just Looking Thanks!* (Trafford Publishing, 2006) and creator of the You Are The Difference customer service coaching program, which helps retailers elevate their level of service, resulting in happier customers and greater sales. Dunbar will deliver the Retailer Workshop keynote address on Wednesday, Sept. 25, at 5 p.m. in Room 322/323.

You started as a franchisee. How did that lead you into retail coaching?

Alf Dunbar: My business got into financial trouble and I was about to go bankrupt, so I had two options: fight or go under. I decided to fight. I completely changed my way of approaching customer service, selling, staff management and how I looked at myself as a person. I decided to focus on the positive rather than the negative.

My new way of working proved to be very successful, and I saved my business. I added an extra 42 percent to my turnover [revenue], which also won me Manager of the Year in Denmark, where my shop was located. The company that controlled the franchise, which was based in the U.K., asked me to try my techniques in one of its largest stores in London to see if I could make a difference there. I worked for three months in that store, seven days a week with 48 staff members, and we put an extra £30,000 on the turnover—achieving target for the very first time.

After that, I was asked to design a coaching program we could roll out into all 900-plus stores in the U.K., so I did, and You Are The Difference was born.

Please tell us more about *Just Looking Thanks!*

AD: I wrote the book in 2006 as a way to share my personal story about how I developed the You Are The Difference program, to explain its principles and techniques in detail, and to give people who took part in my coaching sessions or who are interested in customer service a personal reference.

What can retailers expect from You Are The Difference?

AD: The program provides the skills, knowledge and confidence to help retailers get the most from their businesses through daily interaction with customers. It provides simple but powerful tools that will help a salesperson greet, approach and close sales in a natural, relaxed way and also have a more positive day every day.

What makes your service program well suited to natural products retailers?

AD: The program easily can be adapted by all retailers, regardless of the products they sell. However, I feel that natural products retailers enjoy a more relaxed, personal, interactive relationship with their customers that fits perfectly with my program.

Natural products customers are a little more interested in and educated about the products they buy than traditional shoppers are, and they tend to be very loyal to the stores they frequent. They are more open to interaction with store employees who work closely with products.

Any quick tips to help natural retailers make a great impression on shoppers?

AD: Retailers need to remember to “live the customer first.” By that I mean putting the customer first in everything you do. For example, there are always lots of tasks to be done in a shop, but a task may be able to wait while perhaps the customer may not. It’s all about priorities and prioritizing.

I also suggest that retailers create theater around new or special products whenever possible. They can set up a table with a product and samples that customers can taste and ask questions about. At the table, a staff member could engage customers and encourage them to try the product and experience its benefits. I have developed a special coaching program called Taste the Difference, which provides unique tools to maximize sales from this type of theater. I have also done this outside a shop, which is brilliant, as it captures new customers who are passing.

And, of course, retailers should always remember to create a friendly, welcoming atmosphere in the shop, to be aware of customers looking for help, and to give a really great last impression at the till or when customers leave—even if they don’t buy.

What are some of the biggest mistakes retailers make?

AD: They get too focused on the look of the shop and treat customers as an interruption to their day.

With more people shopping online, what differentiates brick-and-mortar stores?

AD: The personal experience you receive in-store is the key difference that cannot be found online. Customers might not remember what they bought or what it cost, but they will usually remember how you made them feel.

What’s one thing you’d tell a struggling business?

AD: Stand back and try to see what’s really going on. Sometimes a business gets so close to itself, so far into the fire, that it can’t see the opportunities that are there.



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