

A background image of two retail workers, a woman with curly hair and a man, both wearing aprons and smiling while looking at a tablet. The image is overlaid with a semi-transparent orange/red filter.

2019

HARNESS THE POWER OF HOLIDAY WORKERS:

BEST PRACTICES FOR MAXIMIZING  
IN-STORE ENGAGEMENT AND

REVENUE



While a **well-considered holiday hiring strategy** is the bedrock of holiday associate management, retailers still have plenty of opportunities to optimize their workforce approach until Christmas Day. As full-time veterans and temporary part-time workers converge, forming the frontline of the holiday shopping experience, retailers can make the most of their combined abilities to live up to their brand promises — even at the peak of the season.

Store managers play an outsized role during the holidays, and it's their interactions with frontline staff that largely determine whether they'll rise to the occasion or feel overwhelmed by pressure. Retailers should make sure managers are balancing their requests and expectations for high-stress work with the right tools and acknowledgements to ensure workers feel appreciated.

Key practices for balancing the needs of seasonal associates, full-time associates and the store itself include:



**Train with purpose:** Seasonal associates aren't going to match the skills of long-term employees, but the right training can still pay dividends. Informed associates can offer better customer service and cover multiple roles as needed.



**Practice well-managed scheduling:** There's no avoiding the sporadic spikes and lulls in holiday traffic, but the effects on associates can be minimized. Flexible scheduling and data-based predictions can keep staffing right-sized throughout the season.



**Make efforts to avoid burnout:** Even loyal, happy workers can feel harried by the endless rush of customers. Rotating duties and offering proper compensation can keep fatigue from affecting customer service.





# SEASONAL TRAINING, WHILE LIMITED, SERVES A VITAL PURPOSE

Full-time employees take on an almost managerial role during the holidays: their long-term dedication and experience make them well suited to handle the brunt of the holiday rush, while seasonal hires offer support. People who are with a company for just six weeks simply don't have the time to learn the many small but important tricks that make veteran associates so valuable.

However, comprehensive training is critical to ensuring temporary workers deliver on the brand promise, particularly among those who may be new to retail work. In particular, emphasis should be placed on shopper expectations, and how that transforms into customer service best practices.

"The most important thing to do is to make sure that you teach people **what customer service means at every level of experience in the store,**" said Michael Brown, Partner in the Retail Practice of **A.T. Kearney** in an interview with *Retail TouchPoints*. "Whether you're stocking shelves or you're ringing the register, **everyone is responsible for great service.** It really comes down to teaching people that they should drop everything for the customer and welcome them into the store as if they were a guest in their own home."

A good training program also instills a sense of belonging: part-time employees may feel they have less incentive to stay if their retail work is an in-between or secondary job, according to the **Axonify State of Frontline Workplace Training Study**. More than one-third (**36%**) of part-time employees say they lack formal training, which gives them little incentive to offer their all during the busiest periods — or even to stay through the whole season.

## Associates Are Top Holiday Brand Ambassadors



**94%** of associates have conversations with family and friends about the deals and products offered in their stores during the holidays



**47%** of those employees say they have up to 10 conversations about those products per week



**32%** of associates think they could sell 3 to 5 more products per day if they knew more about the product or brand



**23%** of associates think they could sell 5-10 more products per day



**7%** of associates think they could sell 10-15 more products per day



**13%** of associates think they could sell 15+ more products per day

Source: ExpertVoice



# SCHEDULING REQUIREMENTS CAN BE STIFF, BUT TRY TO STAY FLEXIBLE

Holiday traffic is a force of chaos, and half-dead weekday afternoons can suddenly give way to evening rushes with little warning. Predictive analytics and situational awareness can help retailers smooth the bumps, but retailers still need to deal with the scheduling fallout that comes with last-minute shift changes.

Seasonal associates should be the first line of defense against sudden, unexpected upticks in foot traffic. These employees came into the job specifically to work during the busiest time of the year, and unlike full-time employees, they haven't settled into predictable schedules, which can minimize disruption.

"Because of the short-term nature of [seasonal] roles, these become the individuals that are dialed up and down during the holiday season," said Thomas McElroy, Business Model Transformation Leader for **Deloitte's** retail practice. "Retailers know that their non-seasonal workforces need flexibility during the holidays, and this is part of the reason they staff up with part-time workers. Seasonal employees give retailers the ability to provide flexible schedules to their core associate workforce, while meeting customer demand and activating the temporary workforce."

The need for flexibility grows as the season approaches Thanksgiving and then Christmas. Family gatherings become more common and are treasured during the season's peak, so employees (even seasonal ones) should be given some leeway — and compensation when an unwanted shift is necessary — to keep their spirits up through the end of the season.

"Retailers should be versatile enough to let people have the ability to have flexible working hours and to have family time during this period," said Arran Stewart, Co-Founder and Chief Vision Officer of **Job.com**. "On the leadup to the holidays, it's fine because no one's celebrating anything, but during the main period you need to have some sort of understanding. If someone needs to spend time with their family, let them, and if they do come in, reward them. This is the biggest revenue-generating period of the year, so feel free to share the wealth."

# SCHEDULING IS A CHALLENGE, BUT RETAILERS HAVE SOLUTIONS

Percent of retailers that said **aligning staffing to customer demand** was a top store-level challenge.



Percent of retailers that said **aligning scheduling** was a top store-level challenge.



Top tools used to **improve employee morale** and tackle staffing concerns

Advance notice of schedules



Shift swapping



Mobile shift scheduling



Source: Retail TouchPoints





# KEEP ASSOCIATES ON THEIR TOES TO MAINTAIN ENGAGEMENT

The sometimes-stressful holiday retail environment can take its toll on even the most outgoing and energetic associates. Maintaining top-notch customer service means preventing burnout on the front lines, and the simplest way to do that is by keeping the jobs interesting.

“Make sure it doesn’t get monotonous for anyone,” said Brown. “Rotate people through various different assignments, give them changes in their environment and take them from working the register to working with people on the floor. Move them to different departments or areas of the store to keep things fresh, keep them interested and give them new challenges.”

Retailers should also make employees feel like they’re part of the business, not just transient hires who exist outside of normal operations. Many seasonal employees feel a connection to the retailer from their shopping interactions, and the view from the inside should be just as welcoming and empowering.

“Culture is so important for a company,” said Stewart. “We’re pack creatures so we gravitate towards family, towards being embraced, welcomed and accepted. When it comes to a company, they’re like an extended family, and so if you build a culture where you work in an environment where you enjoy the people you work with and you enjoy what it stands for, **people will want to stay with the business for more than just the money.**”

Managers should “keep the associate first and the customer a very close second,” according to McElroy. This ties into Stewart’s advice that associates should be able to have bad days without reflecting poorly on their overall performance. A manager who helps an associate through a rough patch will develop better rapport and have an appreciative helper when they return to form.

# 3 EASY WAYS TO MAKE ASSOCIATES FEEL APPRECIATED

McElroy shared several tips for retailers looking to make sure their associates are receiving proper feedback and recognition during the holidays, to help them feel appreciated and energized to provide great customer service:



## 1. Financial Rewards:

Many associates work during the holidays for both the financial benefits and the discount they receive from a brand they love. Make sure they feel well compensated for the hard work they are putting in.



## 2. Transparency:

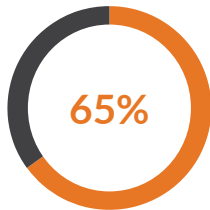
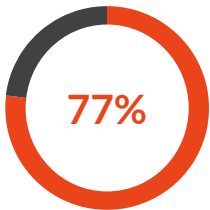
The sheer scope of sales, schedule changes and traffic can be overwhelming. Managers that go above and beyond to keep the lines of communication open, candidly telling associates what is coming and helping them plan properly, will see a boost in worker satisfaction and engagement.



## 3. A Simple Thank You:

A little appreciation can go a long way, so take the time to thank your employees. The holidays are a time for giving, and for giving thanks. Retailers that recognize employees' efforts in a one-to-one or one-to-many scenario can help spread a little joy inside their stores.

# A CAREFUL WIND-DOWN HELPS PREPARE FOR THE NEXT SEASON



The holiday workforce shouldn't just evaporate on December 26: if nothing else, retailers need to prepare for the **77% of consumers who plan to return a portion of their holiday gifts**. The post-holiday season is a prime time for associates to turn transactions from the **65%** of shoppers planning to make in-store returns into exchanges or even upsells.

A careful, measured wind-down will help high-value seasonal employees feel appreciated for their efforts — not that they're being kicked to the curb once the holidays are over. Maintaining these relationships is important. After all, these associates can become valuable recurring seasonal hires, or even part of the year-round team if there is mutual interest.

"Keep track of your seasonal employees, especially the good ones, from one season to the next," said McElroy. "Building a relationship between the employee and the company, even when the employee is seasonal, can deliver tremendous benefits in bringing in the right brand ambassadors."





The hustle and bustle of the holiday season is almost in full force. Continue to get invaluable insights and best practices that can be applied through New Year's Day.

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