

UNDER COVER

the customer experience

Mystery shoppers give high marks to retailers in major Canadian market

By Craig McAndrews

In our fourth undercover shopping study conducted for *Sleep Savvy*, the one word that came to mind as we reviewed the results was simply 'CONGRATULATIONS!' As a group, these Canadian retailers provided a great in-store experience and an overall top-notch encounter through every step of the selling process.

This particular market analysis represents one of best statistical performances we have seen in a long time. With the exception of one department store chain, each of the stores delivered a very positive consumer experience. The solid performance spread across every category of analysis, and it was particularly strong in associates' presentation skills and store appearance.

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Greetings set a positive tone. The shopping experiences in this region received high marks from the start. In fact, a good portion of the positive comments were about the initial greeting. Here are two examples:

“The associate immediately made eye contact, smiled and introduced himself and welcomed me to the store (using the name of the store). He asked what he could help me with on this beautiful day and mentioned he had asked for a retractable roof, but his request had not been successful (great small talk). This associate was very personable.”

“Shortly after arriving in the store, the associate approached

and welcomed me to the store. He asked if he could provide some assistance. His greeting showed warmth and a genuine desire to assist.”

The words “warmth”, “smile”, “genuine”, “pleasant” and “easy to talk to” were common in shoppers’ reports. However, there was also an example or two that we can all learn a lesson from on what *not* to do as it relates to the initial in-store impression.

“I entered the store and found my way to the mattress section. I looked at a number of models and tried them out before I was approached by a sales associate. It was five minutes before the associate came up to me. She asked if I was looking for anything in particular. She did not

The price is right

One of the more interesting findings in this Canadian market study was the average price of the first queen set the shoppers were shown: \$1,758 (approx. \$1,635 U.S.). That may not be remarkable in and of itself, but only 35% of the shoppers felt this was higher than they had expected. Traditionally, as we begin to go over \$1,500 in queen, we find many shoppers feel this is high. Clearly the consumer base in this market perceives the cost of a good mattress to be in line with what the retail associates are presenting. In fact, 40% of the shoppers said that the \$1,758 queen price was *lower* than they expected.

welcome me, and she did not offer her name.”

“I spent 10 minutes reviewing the beds before I decided to look for a service person. The associate did not welcome me to the store, and he commented there were only three staff members available for two different departments located on the floor.”

As we've seen before, the number-one frustration consumers express is the lack of initial acknowledgement when entering a store. In contrast, when sales associates do the opposite – when they offer an acknowledgement quickly, engage in some small talk and provide a genuine welcome – the in-store process is off to a great start.

An inviting environment

Creating an inviting store environment, attention to detail and cleanliness appear to be priorities for the retailers in this market. And it was clear from shoppers' comments that this contributes to a positive in-store experience.

“The interior was well arranged, bright and clear. The aisles were wide, and the sleep sets were easy to get between. I was quite impressed with the layout and selection.”

“The store's interior was very inviting, and there was a very nice fragrance when I entered.”

“I was most impressed with the housekeeping of this site...The store was impeccable and looked terrific. It was a pleasure to spend time in this well-kept store.”

Asking the right questions

Each of the retailers in this study pays obvious attention to qualifying customers prior to presenting product features and benefits. In fact 100% of the associates made sure to determine comfort preference prior to presenting product. In addition, 100% of the associates asked specific questions to understand the customers' needs. This was evident in comments such as this one:

“He asked me several ques-

tions about how I slept at night and if I had any problems sleeping. He asked if I tossed and turned, and he wanted to know if I slept on my side, back or front. He worked to establish my sleep patterns and matched them to the qualities of the bed.”

This comment illustrates one of the most significant components of a great in-store experience. Delivering a presentation with an emphasis on sleep quality provides the

Winning associates out

In each of our in-store studies, we ask our mystery shoppers to comment on the experience in terms of the overall impression made on the customer. In this Canadian market, the winning experiences far outnumbered the losers, and judging by the comments, some of these associates were among the best we've ever encountered.

The winners

“I found the sales associate to be most affable, knowledgeable, focused and sincere. From the start she was jovial as she had me try beds to choose the best fit. She even said if I fell asleep, she would wake me up in the morning with coffee. She invited me to the store's tent sale and gave me a written VIP invitation to attend. I was really impressed with her sincere and friendly style. I would have bought the bed on the spot.”

“I would rate this experience as one in which I felt important as a customer. The associate was genuinely interested in helping me with the purchase that would meet my needs. Although he was busy with another customer, he was courteous in his approach, making me feel comfortable and valued.”

“The associate was a terrific salesperson! I never felt pressured to buy; in fact, it seemed that the actual purchase was secondary to his wish to provide a quality sleep solution with a high comfort level to the customer. All of his questions were geared to providing the best sleep options, and he certainly knew what he was talking about. I must say, I had no idea the extent to which mattresses had improved since I last bought a bed! He made this assignment fun and easy, and I certainly would have purchased a sleep set from him.”

customer with a unique experience compared to most store environments. Our research reveals that the typical associate emphasizes product specifications and price. Based on our experience, a presentation emphasizing sleep is more successful.

While associates in this market did a better job of discussing sleep than many, there is still room for improvement. During the presentations, only 55% asked about the customer's sleep quality, and just

60% asked what was wrong with the customer's current sleep set. Each of these questions represents an opportunity to move the interaction to a sleep-based experience instead of a product-centered encounter.

Closing without pressure

Our Canadian associates also demonstrated very good performance in closing. A full 95% asked the customers if they were ready to purchase. This figure is significant-

ly higher than we've found in most markets, where many retail associates stop short of asking this key question. However, what makes this especially admirable is the fact that only 10% of the shoppers felt pressured to purchase. It was also clear that most of these shoppers, had they actually been in the market to buy a mattress, would have purchased from these associates.

Here are some of the shopper comments:

"The associate mentioned that customer satisfaction made this retailer the number-one store for mattresses. He mentioned their price guarantee and said they would undersell the competition by 5%, showing me a binder with their competitors' pricing. I never felt pressured to buy and thoroughly enjoyed the associate's presentation, as I learned a lot about mattresses and would have definitely ordered the queen set from him today."

"The associate tried to close the sale by presenting me with the discounted price and noted that I could open a store credit card to get the extra 10% off. When I told the associate I was undecided, he just asked, 'Are you okay, did I answer all of your questions?' and then stated I could always call him if I needed additional information."

"The associate remained polite and courteous when I decided not to purchase the mattress that day and did not place any undue pressure on me. He took down my name and telephone number and mentioned he could follow up with me in several days."

Outnumbered the losers



The losers

"The associate was somewhat personable and polite, but was still product-focused. He talked about how he really believed in the brand he was recommending to me, but there was no personal conversation during our interaction."

"The associate tried to close the sale by telling me that the mattress was at a good sale price and would be going very quickly. I felt pressured since he kept asking me to put down a deposit."

"The sales associate did not ask me about how well I was sleeping. He only started showing me different mattresses."

“The associate encouraged the sale, but I did not feel pressured to purchase.”

The last quote really caught our attention. There is probably no better word to substitute for ‘closing’ the sale than ‘encouraging’ the sale. This simple process, if applied by more retail associates, would result in fewer intimidated consumers and more satisfied customers.

As a quick point of comparison to the excellent closing approaches outlined above, here’s what another shopper wrote:

“The associate asked if I wanted the mattress. He left me to go to the computer to see what arrangements could be made for me. When he returned, he asked if I would like to return with my husband. I felt a bit pressured when the associate seemed taken aback that I was not jumping at the opportunity to save 50% by purchasing now.”

The bottom line is that it is not always about the price. The key when asking for the sale is to remain courteous and avoid high-pressure tactics, then circle back to the reasons the customer has given you for being in the market and look for ways to *encourage* the sale.

Personal interaction works

Consumers are very clearly more influenced by the interaction with the sales associates than they are by other elements of the in-store experience. In fact, while the majority of the associates presented product information as well as



store services, the real difference was in the attitudes and approaches of the associates themselves.

Several of the shoppers took note when the associate focused on improving the quality of the customer’s sleep versus some other item. Several made comments when the associate engaged in small talk or a more personal conversation during the interaction.

As a salesperson, you might be thinking to yourself that the cus-

Why one store failed

For the first time in our studies for *Sleep Savvy*, the differences among distribution channels were very limited. Although the sleep shops performed best overall, the furniture stores and one department store also delivered very good experiences.

The one exception was a department store chain with a substantially below-par performance. Had we excluded the stores in this chain from the study, the total scores would have set an all-time record for excellence in store performance in a particular market.

Here’s a summary of why this chain failed to live up to the other stores we shopped:

For starters, the initial greeting was well behind the other retailers we visited in this market. Shoppers were greeted late, if at all. There was very little small talk, and most of the associates did not offer their names to the customers.

The impression at times was that the associates were indifferent to the customers. In one case, the shopper wrote: “I looked at a number of models before the associate approached. She asked if I was looking for something, but did not welcome me or offer her name.”

The indifference seemed to carry over into the qualifying section. Very few of the department store associates asked key questions. There was little discussion of sleep and sleep quality. The focus was strictly on product and the price.

On the plus side, the appearance of the stores received favorable comments such as: “The high level of cleanliness and attractive decor left a great impression” and “The interior of the store was very inviting and the displays were tidy and attractive.” However, while it was clear in our study that an attractive store and attention to detail make an impression, when it comes to influencing consumers to make a purchase decision, nothing can overcome the influence of the retail sales associate.

tomers is not interested in getting to know you or discussing irrelevant issues, but this is not the case. Time and time again, shoppers make notes on how well they connect with their associates. [For examples, see the section on winning associates.]

Don’t miss the opportunity to be a ‘real person’ first and a salesperson second. It will make a big difference with your customers and your sales success. ●

The telephone

Opportunity lost . . . again

For those of you who have read the results of our previous market studies for *Sleep Savvy*, this section might sound familiar. The findings are very similar to what we see in many markets across the country. The bottom line is always the same: ***Too many retailers are terrible when it comes to delivering any type of positive experience on the phone.***

Some of the retailers in this Canadian metro area, particularly the sleep shop channel, were better than many in some respects. But the overall findings still represent a lot of opportunity for improvement.

The positive results were found in the fact that 83% of the store associates expressed enthusiasm and even offered their name. However, when you compare that to the fact only 6% asked for the consumer's name, you can clearly see why consumers feel insignificant when calling retail stores.

According to our shoppers, the majority of telephone experiences delivered more indifference than anything else. Over and over, we read comments such as this one:

“The associate was polite, but did not expand on any of the answers given and did not ask me questions about my needs.”

Associates were generally willing to answer questions, but this misses the real opportunity when it comes to the telephone. Success on the phone results from the process of



engaging customers personally by asking for their names, asking for some detail on their product needs, giving them a reason to come into the store today and making sure they know where you are located. It is that simple.

Instead, here is what we found in this market:

- 33% of the associates answered the customer's questions **and** asked additional questions.
- 11% mentioned the current sale

or event.

- 17% provided reasons the customer should visit the store.
- 6% provided directions to the store location, including cross streets and/or landmarks.
- 0% provided the customers with a reason to come into the store today.

The dark side of telephone experiences is captured in the following shopper comment:

“The first call I made was transferred to the furniture department and I was placed on hold for a long time. When someone came on the line, they said mattresses was on another line and asked if I could hold again. If I had been a real customer, I would not have waited and hung up.”

Opportunity to create a positive shopping experience exists at every point in which the consumer comes in contact with a store and its employees. In the case of the telephone, we'd say the opportunity to stand out from the crowd is significant. ●



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