Alex Winiecki
Senior Vice President Retail

Yankee Candle is the leading designer, manufacturer, wholesaler and retailer of premium scented candles. The company sells its products through a vast wholesale network and at more than 600 company owned retail stores.

Yankee Candle's traffic and conversion program is driving incremental sales and profit, but it wasn't always that way. According Alex Winiecki, Senior Vice President of Retail, it took a shift in thinking and the right partner – which it found in HeadCount.

Before HeadCount, Yankee Candle had traffic counters installed in about 50 stores, but the data quality was very poor – inconsistent and not at all timely. According to Winiecki, most of the traffic data they were getting was incomplete or incorrect and he and his team members had absolutely no confidence in the data. Says Winiecki, "I can give you a laundry list of the problems we had. The data wasn't usable and there was no credibility in the program at all – it was just a bunch of information thrown some place. It wasn't working."

But data quality was just the first issue. Says Winiecki, "even for the handful of stores where the data looked OK, no one was responsible for analyzing it and extracting the insights. No one was held accountable for any of the information."

HeadCount helped to restore confidence in the data. Despite the company's disappointment with their previous traffic counting program, Winiecki had experience working with traffic and conversion data before he joined Yankee Candle and knew how important these metrics could be if they were properly leveraged.

It was at this time Winiecki heard about HeadCount and after a couple of meetings he agreed to do a pilot test. The experience was immediately different. "The HeadCount team was extremely responsive to questions and to challenges," says Winiecki. "The first critical step was answering the question: Are the counts correct? Restoring confidence in the data was going to be a big challenge, but HeadCount was up for it."

Getting store managers on-board was critical. Says Winiecki, "Even with new traffic equipment installed by HeadCount, we had some store managers tell us that they didn't believe the traffic counts. HeadCount would immediately get on the phone with the store manager and work through his/her questions and even conduct audits to prove the counts were right until the manager could say, 'yeah, that's it. That's my number.'"

Winiecki credits HeadCount with being instrumental in establishing credibility so that the store manager wasn't worried about all the "noise about the count being right" and, instead, could focus on improving performance. In fact, the initial rollout worked so well that individual managers would call up Winiecki and give him personal testimonials saying "I needed help with this and HeadCount was right there."

HeadCount's direct engagement with store managers was a critical part of restoring confidence in the data and, says Winiecki, "once that occurs there's credibility in the data and belief in it and then you can really work on raising the conversion rate."

HeadCount's TalkTraffic® program helped get managers to buy-in and use the insights.
Winiecki understood that if the company was going to deliver better results, then it was important that the insights be circulated throughout the organization – from store managers right up to the executive committee. Winiecki emphasizes that increasing conversion is not just an in-store activity – it takes "total company involvement."

But sending reports out to managers wasn't going to be enough. Field managers, in particular, needed help to 'connect-the-dots', to understand what the insights meant and how to put them to practical use. Says Winiecki, "HeadCount is exceedingly good at showing people throughout the organization how the data can help them and here are some practical things you can do to improve performance," he says. "They got rave reviews."

Says Winiecki, "Folks at HeadCount have done a terrific job of training and getting our folks well in line with competing with their own numbers – measuring themselves against their own performance. It wasn't just about selling us a program and saying 'here, we'll get you some numbers.'"

The real stakeholders for the program are the store managers and he says HeadCount's TalkTraffic web-based coaching service was helpful to show them how to improve performance based on the data and to understand they're not out there on their own.

Another important piece of the program was to establish internal champions, which Winiecki says HeadCount was really helpful in working with him on.

Winiecki assigned one of his top district managers to be the coordinator for the initial pilot test and to act as the in-house 'district manager trainer.' A second person was added as the in-house sales trainer, and both focused on explaining the 'how to' for applying insights from the data and reports with help from the experts at HeadCount.

"HeadCount has been great throughout. They're not just a 'one dance' partner. We call them up and say 'let's do that again,'" says Winiecki.

HeadCount helped deliver a real, measurable business impact. Winiecki knows with certainty that the pilot stores that had the HeadCount program drove incremental sales and profit compared to the stores that did not. As a result of the successful test, Yankee Candle expanded the HeadCount program to approximately 300 stores and then ultimately to all 600 plus locations as well as to all new stores as they open.

HeadCount ensures their reporting is delivered daily at store-level. Winiecki's team is committed to analyzing and using the insights to guide operational issues such as scheduling. A key to Yankee Candle's success with their traffic and conversion program is that they don't use the data as a disciplinary tool, but rather as a productivity tool where the manager embraces it as something that will help.

"One of the suggestions that HeadCount gave us that was 100% correct, was don't compare your conversion rate to your neighbors but compare it to yourselves and what you could do differently to improve in your store," he says. Yankee Candle's measurement is part of staff performance metrics and focuses on each manager improving his/her own stores' performance.

In fact, Yankee Candle discourages comparing stores on conversion rate, preferring to compare the variances in the improvement. "This is where I have to say that HeadCount TalkTraffic was helpful because it set the stage for how to look at the information and how to evaluate it. And TalkTraffic is never about 'you're doing a lousy job.' It is always 'how could you improve to get more business for your company...and really for yourself, because our store managers are on incentive," he says.

Winiecki sees HeadCount's traffic and conversion program as a powerful business tool that has been able to deliver impressive business results for Yankee Candle. Although Winiecki can't disclose specific numbers for competitive reasons, he says comp store sales have definitely improved to the point where "we are really very happy with the results."

Winiecki highly recommends HeadCount and is impressed by the company's professional, quality service and responsive team. He would tell other retail executives "if you are looking for something to really improve your business and get engagement with your store managers and district managers, HeadCount is the partner to help you do that."

HeadCount®

HeadCount is the leading authority on retail traffic and customer conversion analysis and the company's Founder and CEO Mark Ryski has written two definitive books on the topic, the latest *"Conversion: the Last Great Retail Metric"*. For more information, please visit www.headcount.com.