

# **Employee sharing, more technology seen as way to better use scarce staff**

**Splitting staff between restaurants and stores might see more workers available during busiest times**

**Ron Chalmers, The Edmonton Journal**

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EDMONTON - Innovative hiring, technological savvy and improved training can help stores deliver good service during the busy holiday season, say local retail experts.

Some entrepreneurs are discussing "employee sharing between retailers and hotels or restaurants," says Dianne Johnstone of the Retail Council of Canada.

Many retailers need workers during the afternoon while the hospitality industry needs them in the morning and evening, she says. So managers from the two industries have proposed to share staffers who are willing to work such split shifts.

Mark Ryski, president of HeadCount Corporation, says effective retailers provide websites to answer consumer questions that otherwise might be asked of the scarce sales staff.

Websites also enable comparison shopping within and between stores -- with no driving, parking or standing.

To quickly answer questions on the sales floor, retailers are turning to "fast-track training" in product knowledge -- supported by informational material, Johnstone says.

Staff cannot know every detail of every product -- but they can respond to almost every question when the retailer supplies answers in print or online.

In a short-staffed store, Ryski says, shoppers can be helped by effective signage including flat-screen, television-style monitors that carry in-store advertising or steer shoppers toward popular items. With better signs, stores can commit more staff to running the cash registers. When busy, "keep all your checkouts open," Ryski advises.

Some retailers, such as Home Depot and Real Canadian Superstore, also have self-scanning checkouts.

"They're starting to make an impact," Ryski says. But he thinks their market penetration will be slowed by capital costs, security issues and consumer resistance.

Incentives can attract shoppers to off-peak periods when they'll get better service, Ryski says. Some restaurants offer "early-bird specials" or "twofer Tuesdays." Canada Safeway often gives extra Air Miles on weekdays.

Finally, Ryski says in-store traffic counting -- a service that his company sells -- helps retailers to "make the most of the staff they do have."

Historical counts can help retailers to anticipate traffic volumes, then set their shift schedules knowing which days and hours will be most busy -- and how traffic will be affected by weather, he says.

Staffing for traffic seems like common sense but Ryski says some managers rely too much on their errant intuition, and fail to anticipate slow or busy periods.

And some retailers only look at actual sales.

Ironically, Ryski says, high traffic with low staffing can cause a crowded store's sales to decline and tempt an uninformed manager to reduce staff -- when adding staff would boost sales, profits, and customer satisfaction.

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