

Hiring Help:

Shape your staff to reach their goals and yours

by Joanne Cleaver

The customer wanted to make a wedding dress. But she didn't know how to sew. Every day, she walked into Nancy's Sewing Basket, a specialty fabric store in Seattle, and bought another yard of another shade of silk for her months-long experiment in improvisational dressmaking.

For Kristi McDonough, a Nancy's staffer with substantive self-taught sewing skills augmented by college-level pattern drafting courses, this customer was a challenge on several levels: sales, store reputation and customer communication. But McDonough turned the situation into a triple win. As she coached the customer through the complex project, she kept the customer coming back. The completed dress was a hit, expanding the store's reputation as the go-to source for expert assistance. Plus, McDonough realized that she really had a knack for outlining step-by-step directions. That fueled her ambition to launch her own line of patterns, which will come to fruition this spring when her first pattern, "The Betsy Travel Bag", is published by Rebel Craft Media.

Great employees realize that each transaction builds customer loyalty. And great store managers and owners apply that same insight to hiring and cultivating employees: Daily tasks can support employees' professional growth, making the store a satisfying place to work and a happy place for customers to shop.

Smart hiring involves more than screening for the abilities to smile, snip and swipe. Offering



multifaceted opportunities to part-time employees can benefit both the shop owner and the staffer who helps build the business while gaining skills that support career growth. (See "Finding the Right Fit" for ideas on how to interview candidates with their professional development in mind.)

Break away from the mind-set of hiring part-timers whose motivation is to "work for fabric," says Judy Crockett, a retail management consultant and owner of Interactive Marketing & Communication of Manistee, Mich., who specializes in advising main street retailers.

Instead, develop a hiring strategy that both builds on profitable ongoing store strengths and drives improvements and growth. Many successful stores, for instance, hire staff with advanced technical skills that managers hope will translate to expert advice for customers. But Crockett recommends also looking at your growth goals and at service weaknesses, then hiring staff with both the aptitude and attitude to address those categories.

For example, says Crockett, if customer expectations for social media content feel like a constant drag on the time and attention of

your current staff, consider a part-time position that officially includes cultivating your store's marketing presence on Facebook, Pinterest, Instagram and Twitter.

Or if you find that customers are slow to pick up on the advantages of new tools, hire a part-timer who wants to gain skills in training, with the expectation that the staffer will develop classes and tutorials that support and sell those tools.

Strategies such as these are paying off at Mary Jo's Cloth Store in Gastonia, N.C. For the past two years, Betty Cloninger, buying manager for Mary Jo's, has been working with other senior leaders in the family-owned business to revamp job titles, descriptions, responsibilities and employee development.

Employees are required to have in-depth knowledge of quilting and sewing trends, techniques and tools for their assigned categories, and they must be able and ready to cross-train other employees so that they can fill in for each other when needed.

At the same time, Cloninger is customizing some positions to make the most of employees' aspirations while supporting big-picture marketing and customer service goals. One clerk in the home decorating department is now blogging monthly about decorating trends, building a following of local decorators and homeowners. Others are expanding the store's classes and support for accessories, bags and quilting tools.

Cloninger has found that on-demand online tutorials have raised customers' expectations of staff ability to teach on the spot. That means staff members are coaching each other in the latest craft and sewing fads and in how to best demonstrate those. The skill of peer mentoring, says Cloninger, helps her detect emerging leaders and teachers for the store's rapidly expanding roster of workshops.

The very climate of a quilt store can be a catalyst for part-timers' career growth. Some part-timers crave a complete change of pace from their day jobs and hope that the collaborative atmosphere of a quilt or fabric store will orient them to a shift to a creative career.

"Ideally, a great sales associate loves the product, is your core customer and understands what your core customer likes," says Ellen Davis, executive director of the National Retail Federation Foundation. "It's a lot easier to sell what you like. Literally, it becomes a peer-to-peer customer experience, like shopping with a friend."

"Hire for attitude, assuming that they know how to sew," says Kitrina Carter, assistant manager at Nancy's Sewing Basket. "It's really about being around our customers and staff and all their creativity."

Brenna Tiongco, a part-timer at Stone Mountain & Daughter Fabrics, a Berkeley, Calif., quilt and specialty fabric store, is using her time there to ease back into the professional sewing world with the aim of fine-tuning her next career steps.

As a former manager with Husqvarna Viking, she wanted to reconnect with customer service and scope out a potential move into teaching, both at the store and privately. The key element of her job, says Tiongco, is "affirming customers' aspirations" and cultivating insights that will enable her to design courses that attract clients.

Finding the Right Fit

Quilt shop and fabric store owners often hire from the ranks of your most enthusiastic — and skilled — customers. While you will need to verify a candidate's technical skills, you also need to detect a customer-service orientation. Attitude and customer empathy are hallmarks for successful retail service at all stores, says Ellen Davis, executive director of the National Retail Federation Foundation.

Understanding the candidate's career goals can help you offer opportunities for growth that keep part-timers engaged, loyal and productive — all qualities that will benefit your business.

These interview questions can help you understand how a position at your store might support the career aspirations of a candidate or current employee.

- What aspects of working in this shop appeal to you?
- Show us some of your recent projects, via photos stored on a mobile device or shared via social media. What is the story behind your favorite recent project, and why did you share it the way you did?
- What do you hope to learn or experience by working here that you don't get at all, or enough of, at your current job? (This question can be adapted for older workers who are reentering the workforce or seeking a retirement position by asking, "What do you hope to learn or experience by working here that you never gained at your prior jobs?")
- Do you want to get into training or teaching, either of sewing or of other skills? If so, what type of training or teaching opportunities would you like to gain through working here?

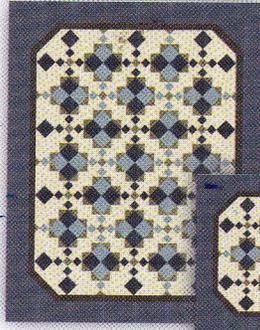
- Say you successfully work here for a couple of years and can apply your experiences here to your day job or next career step. How would you update your resume to reflect the key gains from working here? What would your resume say about your experience here?

Don't get hung up on prior experience when interviewing, advises retail consultant Judy Crockett. "All of us have had jobs we were good at but didn't like," she says. "Look for what the candidate likes to do and wants to do. That person will be the best fit."

Joanne Cleaver is a freelance writer whose specialties include entrepreneurship and advancing women. Her latest book is the Career Lattice (McGraw Professional, 2012), which outlines the power of lateral career moves.

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