Improving knowledge of produce at Somerfield

Somerfield developed a 'Passion for Produce' training programme to improve customer service and the quality of fresh food in its stores. The one-day programme was developed to provide colleagues with increased knowledge in produce using a multimedia approach. Regional managers played a key role in the design and delivery of the course, which helped to ensure their buy-in and commitment to change. The company believes that the training has resulted in higher levels of customer service and a significant return on investment.

Somerfield is a high street supermarket with over 900 stores in the UK. It employs more than 43,000 people.

Identifying a training need

Somerfield commissioned customer research in 2005, which highlighted that customers rated it behind its key competitors for fresh food and produce. 'One of the key goals of our business strategy is to be known for offering high quality foods with a particular emphasis on fresh produce,' says Elizabeth Purtell, People Development Manager at Somerfield. 'So this research flagged up an area that became a high priority for the company to address. The people development team got involved to determine whether a training intervention, or something else, was required.'

Listening to customer feedback

The company has a customer insight team, which is responsible for providing up-to-date information on market trends, seeking feedback from customers and analysing sales figures to build a complete picture of the company's performance. The data collected by the team showed that customers found the level of knowledge and service offered by store colleagues to be inconsistent. 'Our customers also said the quality of our fresh produce was inconsistent, despite there being evidence that the standard of food entering the store is high compared to competitors,' says Purtell. 'Therefore, the care and handling of produce in store became one of our key training needs.'

Visiting stores

Once the customer research had been reviewed and analysed, Somerfield decided to visit stores across the country to develop a thorough training needs analysis.

The people development team talked to operational colleagues at all levels, to competitors and to experts in the head office. 'We wanted to make sure that we identified a real skills gap and designed a training programme to solve a problem that actually existed,' says Purtell. 'The visits reinforced the findings of the customer research. We identified a skills gap among store teams in product knowledge, the acceptable standard and how to present and care for produce. This gap was evident among store managers, fresh trading managers and produce supervisors who all have a big impact on the levels of quality maintained.'

Passion for produce

To improve employees' handling and knowledge of fresh food, Somerfield designed a new training programme – 'Passion for Produce'.

Setting up the programme

The people development team was responsible for designing the new course. The team consists of nine training and development specialists, who work in collaboration with stakeholders to support business strategy. To develop the Passion for Produce course, the team worked closely with the Fresh Director and regional managers, as well as the product solutions, buying and retail services teams. An external company provided the technical support to design the interactive presentations used in the course.

Somerfield budgeted £55,000 for the training course, including the multimedia presentation, artwork, printing and facilitator packs.

Using in-house expertise

Bill Harvey, Somerfield's Senior Technical Solutions Manager, made a significant contribution. 'Bill has an extensive knowledge of fresh produce that we were able to draw upon and use to develop the course materials,' says Purtell. 'He also proved invaluable in supporting the managers responsible for running the training sessions when they were asked questions on produce that they couldn't answer.'

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Piloting the course

The course was piloted in early 2006 across two regions to judge the success of the training and make improvements before delivery to the rest of the company.

Delivering training

The training was rolled out to all employees with roles that have an impact on the produce department. 'Because this training intervention was seen by the company as being a high business priority, we wanted to upskill regional managers, senior managers who visit stores, store managers and produce supervisors,' explains Purtell. 'All those that attended the programme were then responsible for disseminating what they had learnt on the course to their direct reports and ensuring that departments were maintained to the required standard.'

Handing responsibility to regional managers

Somerfield gave ownership and responsibility for delivering the Passion for Produce course to its regional managers and fresh food support department. 'They took full accountability for booking, running and following up on the workshops in their region,' says Purtell. 'We felt that this training intervention was too focused on operational issues to be delivered by an HR manager. The regional managers were also best placed to schedule the training around local stores and the workload of delegates.'

'We needed to gain the buy-in of regional managers because they had to believe in the course to come across as convincing in their delivery,' continues Purtell. 'The programme was in their interest too because it is key to their role in the company – they are responsible for increasing sales, reducing the level of waste and providing excellent customer service.'

Training the facilitators

The regional managers attended a workshop to provide them with an overview of the objectives of the training and to refresh their product knowledge before delivering the course. The fresh food support team were also given training on presentation and coaching skills.

Simple to deliver

The course itself was designed to be as easy to present as possible, with a clear structure and timed delivery. 'We designed it in this way so that managers felt comfortable and confident in their delivery of the course,' explains Purtell. 'This also helped to make sure that the training was consistent across all of the regions because managers weren't able to cut out the bits they didn't like.' A comprehensive manual was produced, which included detailed product information and supporting material.

Aims of Passion for Produce

Somerfield developed its Passion for Produce course to help ensure its colleagues are able to:

- help customers using increased product knowledge and confidence
- care for the product better by using knowledge of storage, handling and the supply chain
- sell or remove products before the quality starts to deteriorate
- improve standards of hygiene and presentation in the warehouse and on the shop floor
- show increased passion for their products and department

Course content

The training took place in in-store training rooms. Regional managers facilitated the course using an interactive video presentation and answered any questions from delegates. The one-day programme included:

- setting out the objectives of the course
- a walk-round and an assessment of the store's produce department, with candidates awarding the display and quality of food a mark out of ten
- a 'wall of words' – a fun team activity identifying the properties of various fruit and vegetables to engage participants
- 'from seed to fork' – an insight into the lifecycle of fresh food, including an emphasis on how produce should be handled, with a film from Fyffes on bananas
- 'better, simpler, faster' – training on best practice in stock rotation, hygiene, storage and presentation of produce, emphasised with a film recorded in stock rooms in Somerfield stores
- 'the good, the bad and the ugly' – the opportunity for delegates to taste, smell and feel the difference in quality between very fresh, one-week-old and out-of-date produce
- a revisit of the store's produce department to reassess the mark given earlier in the day to reinforce learning outcomes
- a recap of the learning with links to action plans.

'The primary goal of the course was to instil passion and enthusiasm in learners,' says Purtell. 'We designed the course to be as accessible and informative as possible. The day contained a variety of exercises and different delivery

techniques to ensure the course suited the learning style preferences of the all delegates – whether pragmatist, activist, reflector or theorist.'

Getting the message across

'The walk-round exercise, where employees rated the food displays, proved particularly effective in getting our message across,' says Purtell. 'At the beginning of the day, most displays scored about seven out of ten. After their training, employees were giving them much lower ratings – about five out of ten. There was a clear change in the delegates' perceptions of how produce should be presented and of the standards expected.'

Taking onboard feedback from learners

The high level of participant interaction during the training gave delegates the opportunity to raise any issues that they had concerning fresh produce. For example, one employee raised the issue of the quantity of some fruit and vegetables that was being delivered. This was a problem in smaller stores that were not able to sell enough before the produce was past its best. As a result of this feedback, Somerfield's buyers negotiated smaller case sizes with its suppliers on some lines and there has been a reduction in the level of food wastage.

Embedding knowledge

Each candidate was given an action plan and a workbook to use as a resource while back in store. Many of the action plans delegates developed focused on retraining colleagues, better and more frequent quality checks and improving the availability of produce. The workbook was specifically designed to be user friendly and easy to read, making it useful to all learners whatever their academic ability. Somerfield encourages store managers to review the progress of the training outcomes regularly in team meetings and discuss them with their regional managers.

Coaching to raise performance

The company views coaching as an essential part of the role of a regional manager. It delivers a programme on how to be an effective coach as part of its training offering. 'We have raised the standards of what is expected of our store colleagues,' says Purtell. 'Some of our colleagues have found it more difficult to apply what they learnt during the course when back in the workplace than others. If this is the case, and colleagues are failing to meet standards, regional managers are expected to use their coaching skills to discuss any issues they might have and help them to raise their performance.'

Benefits of the programme

Around 3,000 employees (approximately 50 in each region) attended Somerfield's Passion for Produce training course from October 2006 to February 2007. The company received enthusiastic feedback – Passion for Produce was rated as excellent or very good by 88 per cent of delegates.

Improving customer service levels

Somerfield believes that colleagues have increased pride and motivation in their roles as a direct outcome of Passion for Produce. It also claims that the course has improved the level of customer service at its stores. 'Some of our store colleagues were unable to identify certain fruit and vegetables, or couldn't explain how they should be eaten,' says Purtell. 'Supplying our colleagues with this information has given them the confidence to answer questions from customers and talk about produce in store, while supporting their teams to do the same. Many of

Training programmes at Somerfield

Induction
Somerfield runs an induction and familiarisation training programme to ensure all new starters are welcomed to the organisation, understand their role and receive the knowledge and skills required to enable them to do their job. The 'starting with...' induction programme is given to all new starters. Employees are given a standard 'starting with... you' induction followed by a specialised course that is relevant to the area in which they are going to be working. For example, for customer service assistants (CSAs) this might be 'starting with... bakery'. The majority of CSAs take several modules so they can benefit from the experience of working in different areas and cover for their colleagues when required.

Management development
The company has invested heavily in its retail management training programmes. Various development programmes are available to support individuals when they move into one of the in-store management roles. The 'Reach' programme provides on-the-job operational training, while the 'Develop' workshops provide behavioural skills such as delegation, coaching and teamwork through a structured framework. Additional workshops provide skills in employee relations, finance and duty management.

Briefings
When there is a particular training need, Somerfield runs one-hour live briefings to upskill its colleagues. For example, one-off briefings were run onsite by store managers to provide staff with an update on changes to the Disability Discrimination Act.

the regional managers have commented that they too have benefited from delivering the training programme. For example, they got to know their colleagues better and are now able to work with them more effectively.'

Raising the profile of training

Somerfield was awarded a National Training Award in recognition of its Passion for Produce programme. 'We have been very pleased with the impact of the course on the business and in store. As well as increasing employees' product knowledge, there has been a renewed enthusiasm for training across the organisation,' says Purtell. 'The success of the programme has highlighted the benefits that can be reaped using a collaborative approach and involving operational staff in training. This has led to changes in how the personal development team works with the business to design and deliver training.'

Measuring return on investment

In addition to the softer benefits of the training, the company believes that it has seen a significant return on investment. It estimates that like-for-like sales in produce rose from five to six per cent from the time the programme started in October 2006 to March 2007. The one per cent difference accounts for over £1.5 million worth of sales in five months and offers a significant return on investment.

Extending the training offered

Because of high staff turnover in the retail sector, Somerfield is aware that ongoing product training is required. It is currently creating a short film containing elements of the workshop for fresh trading managers to use when inducting new starters.

Following the success of Passion for Produce, Somerfield launched a Passion for Bakery training course in January 2008. 'This too has had a similar impact on customer service levels and the quality of our food,' says Purtell. 'We've not had any official figures back yet, but I have already been hearing good things about our bakery sales.'