

FRONTLINE KNOWLEDGE



Increasing employee effectiveness at Best Buy

Developing informed and effective employees is crucial to building loyal customers in the retail world – especially for stores that specialize in products that reflect rapidly-changing technologies. A knowledge sharing program can reduce the ramp-up time for new employees and take advantage of experience acquired by veteran employees. The pay-off? Returning, buying customers. This is the expectation of Best Buy Company, Inc., as it introduces RetailZone, a product and employee knowledge sharing portal, to its sales associates.

In September 2001, Best Buy rolled out RetailZone to its retail associates, with special emphasis on its product specialists who provide sales assistance and product information to customers. The program represents the company's effort to furnish employees with "a one-stop shop for information and ideas," says Fred Baer, KM and interactives manager at Best Buy.

RetailZone offers employees a multi-functional toolkit through which they can access cross-company knowledge sharing, product information, and a reference library of essential company information and news. An e-learning program with on-demand training rounds out the menu of selections.

Powering the program

As part of the technical spine supporting the program, Best Buy has increased the availability of networked PCs throughout the store. The network enables sales associates to contribute to and access a large library of tips, suggestions, best-practice ideas and comments, and product data that make up a critical component of RetailZone's toolkit. "We expect to increase our strategy to execution speed by

allowing a wide sharing of ideas not simply across departments or stores, but across the company," says Baer.

When a sales associate enters RetailZone, the program opens to the employee's department based on his or her job code. From there, the employee has the choice of retrieving product information, researching a question on topics ranging from sales techniques and proficiency to product features and concerns, or submitting feedback on comments or questions already posted. Employee tips are organized according to department, products and product technologies, accessories, and sales proficiencies.

For example, says Baer, many of the suggestions that employees submit concern sales techniques. "We call these behavioral-based suggestions, or 'say's and do's': 'Say this to the customer, or do that.'" An employee can post a comment using the form provided and receive feedback from across the company.

Keeping the sales force informed

By dovetailing product research and product information with this knowledge sharing system, Best Buy expands the ability of its sales force to keep current with new products and technologies. A sales associate can ask to compare products side-by-side as a way of arriving at or bolstering product recommendations or researching specifications. If a customer transaction raises new product questions or selling ideas, the employee can submit them for consideration by colleagues in every store. This can be especially useful in the event that a customer raises new concerns or issues about a product that need to be shared quickly throughout the stores.

After submission, comments and suggestions pass through gatekeepers – seasoned retail employees with

exceptional knowledge of retailing, products, and corporate policies.

Gatekeepers ensure a level of information quality in the system. Anyone reading posted tips or comments can offer feedback, creating chains of information that amplify and illuminate employee submissions. This kind of information leads to best-practice compilations documented with the names of posting employees. Associates can rate a suggestion, on a scale of one to five stars, with the higher number signifying a practice's greater usefulness. Best practices are then organized in a hierarchy according to their ratings, subject to the approval of the gatekeepers.

Observing implementation

To facilitate the design, employees participated in focus groups to offer input on preferred features and processes. Best Buy also gave itself a design period and ample time to study implementation. Usability testing and pilot projects in two districts of average performance tested the program. The pilots zeroed in on areas most likely to demonstrate immediate returns and benefits. For example, service centers pioneered the program to show how knowledge sharing could facilitate easier and faster repairs. Mobile installers – car stereo installation centers – were also crucial targets to reduce installation damage claims.

Baer foresees that RetailZone will shorten the ramp-up time for training new employees. Even more, he says, the program is key to supporting "Loyalty 1," Best Buy's efforts to measure the customer's in-store experience. Smarter, more proficient employees, with the help of the RetailZone, should make for happier customers.

Best Buy

has over 50,000 retail employees and 470 stores throughout the US. It's the leading North American specialty retailer of consumer electronics, personal computers, entertainment software and appliances.



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