

Ensuring Consistency All Day

Every convenience retailer strives to offer the same positive experience to each customer. Further, retailers have an expectation that customer experiences will be positive, that each customer will encounter a clean store, friendly service and well-stocked aisles. While retailers may have operational processes and procedures in place for each store, what is the reality in daily execution? Are different days of the week and times of day measuring up to standards?

In part, the fifth annual CSP-Service Intelligence Mystery Shop Survey sought to gauge the consistency of the customer experience by mystery shopping the participating brands across different days of the week and times of the day. Although there were small differences in days of the week, the more telling signs of possible shortcomings were revealed by the time of day.

Are You Delivering Around the Clock?

Past studies have revealed noticeable declines in both cleanliness and customer service after 5 p.m., mostly due to shift changes and staffing assignments that involve full-time, experienced workers during the day shift and newer, part-time employees on the night shifts. This year's study again uncovered small differences. The most interesting performance decline for time of day belongs to merchandising. From the chart shown, there is a dramatic difference between the morning peak time of 9 to 10:59 a.m. and the evening 7 p.m. to closing time block: a staggering 13.1% drop!

Merchandising measurements included varieties of coffee, single-serve beverage options, candy-bar selection, and the availability of cold and hot food.

The evidence implies that a morning customer is much more likely to find the items he desires, whereas a customer shopping after 7 p.m. may not be able to find his favorite snack or beverage. Research shows that customers remember these out-of-stock occurrences and factor them into their decision when deciding at which convenience store to stop. Further, retailers should be

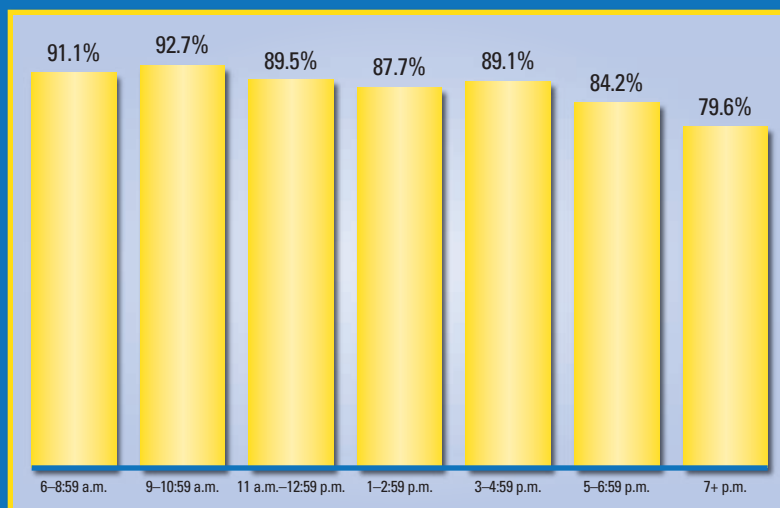
aware that “out of stock” items directly affect the amount of revenue and profit generated by each sale.

Evening Customers Short-Changed

Why such a big change? There are many factors to consider. As mentioned earlier, shift changes usually occur around 4 to 5 p.m. The staff clocking in after 5 p.m. is more likely to be younger, less experienced, part-time employees given that evening and night shifts are less desirable. Often after 5 p.m., there is no manager on duty, leaving employees unsupervised and less likely to diligently check display inventories and restock as required.

But some of the most important customers stop in after

Merchandising Average Score by Time of Day



Source: Service Intelligence

5 p.m.: commuters on their way home from work, students after games or practices, night-shift workers on their way into work, and others stopping by on their way out on the town for the weekend. To better determine your traffic patterns, look at revenue streams: How do they match up against time of day? Could you maximize profits after 5 p.m. by realigning shifts or by providing better training and supervision?

Also, consider restocking procedures. When are shelves and display cases checked, and how many times a day? Does each shift have ownership over guaranteeing that beverage

coolers are stocked, coffee is fresh and food choices are ample?

Some convenience retailers have implemented programs such as “fresh and full at 5” to highlight the importance of that late-afternoon/early-evening store traffic and recognize the opportunity for greater sales and profits. There may be an opportunity to have your most experienced staff prepare

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the store for evening traffic before clocking out, allowing the evening shift to focus on customer service and sales.

It’s Time for a Plan

No convenience retailer wants to alienate customers, and “time of day” should not be a detriment to great customer service and appropriate inventory. Measuring performance at different points of the day could be an enormous undertaking internally, but ensuring consistency for your customers is not impossible. With merchandising specifically, retailers need to be highly cognizant of what they are offering to the customer. Having variety, especially in gourmet coffees and ready-to-eat foods, is certainly a way to differentiate your chain from others; however, it’s the execution of the plan that matters most to customers.

For a solution that captures the type of data you most want, invest in a customer experience evaluation program. This type of program delivers data but also goes further, offering actionable recommendations that can improve underperforming areas and leverage those that are working to your advantage. Taking the extra step to align mystery-shopping results with store revenues across the chain enables even greater understanding and revenue-generating alterations. Be confident that you are delivering to expectations when a customer walks into your store, whether it’s 7 a.m. or 11 p.m., and you will see a payoff in return visits and profits. ■



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