

Ask the Experts

How to redesign a footwear department, create a fitting-fee policy that won't alienate customers and deal with parents who insist on roomy shoes

Q: A couple of years ago, I hired this amazing employee who used to be a dance teacher, and my store has since gained a great reputation for fitting pointe shoes. People come from all over just to be fitted by her. This is both a source of pride and pain for my business, as people are coming in, taking up her time for fittings and then leaving—without buying shoes! I can only assume they are using our information to go discount shopping online. I thought about charging a fitting fee, but I've heard nightmare stories from other retailers about customers getting angry whenever they try to enforce the policy. I don't want to alienate my clientele. Is there a way to do this without upsetting my patrons? Is it just a bad idea in general?

A: You have a wonderful resource in this employee, who clearly provides what your customers need, so make sure your solution takes this into account. In other words, you don't want to do anything to diminish her value or reduce her ability to serve your clientele.

Charging a fitting fee is not a bad idea. In fact, it can be an effective way to show the value of a service. Customers routinely pay a fitting fee for contact lenses and hearing aids, so why not pointe shoes? It could even help position your dance store as having more expertise than others in your local market. It's all a matter of perception.

Of course, you don't want to chase off your legitimate customers. The solution is to refund the fee when someone makes a purchase or apply it toward a sale. This way, your true patrons don't actually pay it. Any in-

store signs—or even staff sales scripts—that explain the fees should focus on that aspect. If shoppers grouse, chances are they weren't in your store to buy, anyway. Your true customers won't mind; after all, nothing extra is coming out of their pockets. And if positioned correctly, the message could even boost loyalty by making good customers feel they are getting special treatment.

The fitting service and your staffer's expertise are drawing customers to your

store, so make sure to leverage these resources. Conduct classes to educate customers about pointe shoes, their care and how they should feel.

Beyond that, give them a reason to come back by making their shopping trip with you an experience they won't forget. Get to know your customers. Use their names. Develop relationships with them. Remember their kids' names (and even their birthdays). Host other events in your store that they can invite friends to.

Be creative. As a local retailer, you need to play to your strengths, which means doing what your online competition can't.

Billed as the "Amazing Service Guy," Kevin Stirtz helps companies increase revenue and profits by improving customer service. President of Stirtz Consulting Group, L.L.C., and author of More Loyal Customers: 21 Real World Lessons to Keep Your Customers Coming Back, Stirtz is a trainer, consultant and speaker who has presented