

Vanilla Doesn't Thrive in Multi-Flavored Retail

Training Melts on a One-size-fits-all Platform



A major theme of NRF 2020 was the urgency to empower and invest in front-line retail employees, the pillar of today's physical stores. This explains the industry's renewed focus on associate training apps, which come in all sorts of flavors – from vanilla modules slipped into multi-faceted solutions, to specialized mobile training and communications platforms customized for in-store associates and their managers, and on improving KPIs.

Consider the many studies, we've all read them, which illustrate the positive impact knowledgeable brand ambassadors have on demanding, educated consumers – and the resulting profits generated.

Also consider the reverse: “A whopping 95% of employees feel they could be delivering greater value to customers with better employee experience training,” according to [TotalRetail](#)¹. And “75% of consumers would stop doing business with a brand if they had a bad experience or received poor customer support.... Many retailers may be inadvertently losing customers to a

surprising culprit: Lack of investment in employee experience.”

Full- vs. Half-Baked Solutions

Many retail platforms include training components that are half-baked “resource centers” – large file shares for posting content. Others have modules not even designed specifically for retail! Still others provide corporate results and/or gamification for compliance purposes but aren't focused on providing field managers with granular data, so important to impacting store results. These non-specialized, one-size-fits-all retail platforms with watered-down training modules have less than viable impact on sales and KPIs. None provide the level of sophistication available and required to create brand ambassadors today.

Essentially there's training to just check a box and say you did training. Then there's interactive, non-streaming video-based, retail-specific training – dedicated to associates and their managers – that impact KPIs and profits from a practical standpoint.

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Because improving these KPIs and profits requires field managers to drive training and communications, the objective of best-in-class mobile training and communications tools is to *build relationships between associates and their managers*. For example, customized field manager dashboards provide granular question-level results for each associate's responses following bite-sized training modules, so managers can coach and mentor individuals in each of their stores. Reporting is also provided to district and regional managers to drive their respective teams.

In a full-baked, sophisticated retail solution with multiple training and communications elements, the process itself – and the retail industry in general – is all about human interactions.

“Many retailers may be inadvertently losing customers to a surprising culprit: Lack of investment in employee experience.”

TotalRetail

Retail Associates Need Coaches

When managers can better coach, mentor and conduct meaningful conversations about KPI impact and progress, they transform employees into Olympic-class sales associates. Equipped with associate quiz response data offered by best-in-class training apps, managers not only identify areas where more coaching and support is needed, but where strengths are evident and praise and rewards due.

[According to Gallup research²](#), organizations that invest in strengths-based development see a 10% to 19% increase in sales and 14% to 29% in increased profit.

The well-coached, technology-driven associate is prime for taking brands to the next level. However, according to a [RetailNext blog³](#), “this is a two-way street, and brands must invest in employee development, and that doesn't mean providing an onboarding packet and delivering

a yearly performance review. Brands must equip associates with knowledge of the brand and its culture, technology assets.... and consistent feedback and coaching. If brands empower their associates by involving and engaging them, associates will establish meaningful connections with shoppers, creating a winning service strategy.”

Companies that offer customer engagement at the highest level need their sales associates to be brand ambassadors, according to a [WWD feature article⁴](#). “That means knowing more than the savvy shopper about products and being aware of brand perception....The challenge today is that only those retailers who invest in effective associate training and evaluation strategies, and in providing up-to-the minute, on-floor communications can keep their employees one step ahead of today's demanding, tech-savvy consumers.”

Jim Harter is chief scientist of workplaces at Gallup. In his [interview with Retail Touchpoints⁵](#), Harter said that employee development “comes down to having those kinds of coaching relationships with individuals where there's clear expectation setting, ongoing conversations between the manager and the employee, and some method of accountability so people know how well they're doing.”

The RTP article said associates' skills should be cultivated and refined: “It's not just about the end-of-year review and the potential for a raise; the modern manager-associate relationship needs to be an ongoing process of communication.”

A coach is someone who involves, encourages and develops individuals by having ongoing conversations, Harter notes. Using a sports analogy, he said, “It probably wouldn't work too well to just delegate to the players then give them an annual review after you watch them play the entire season. It works better if you coach them by helping them know what they're doing right in the moment, before and after they play their games, and even during their games.”

The investment in best-in-class training and communications tools allow this immediate, real-time interaction, coaching opportunity and management support.

Olympic-Level Associates

Here's another sports analogy: Consider the specialized instruction required of Olympians, who train all their lives to excel in their individual disciplines. They aren't involved in every sport, just the ones in which they compete. They aren't a "jack of all skills," but master of one.

Were Nadia Comaneci, Carl Lewis and Mohammad Ali given memberships to their local YMCAs to improve on backflips, run track, box, swim, shoot baskets and lift weights? Of course not. Similarly, why provide employees with a watered-down vanilla retail platform that offers training – along with components like task management, scheduling, inventory lookup and more – when specialized, gold-medal, retail-focused associate training and communications is a click away?

There's no magic, single employee app. Just as we have dozens of apps on our mobile phones, associates can have many Olympic-level apps on their on-floor iPads to excel at various workplace functions.

Please, No Cell Phones on the Sales Floor

Speaking of iPads, today's tablet serves as the necessary hub for connected shopping experiences. With it, associates can quickly access all their Olympic-level apps – and look very professional doing it. In fact, much more professional than staring into their own phones.

Some retailers looking to cut costs (who isn't?) have adopted a Bring Your Own Device (BYOD) strategy, allowing associates to use their own phones to access in-store networks. This approach may save money in the short term, but in the long run can compromise security, productivity and consistency, while creating an unprofessional appearance to customers.

For every dollar a retailer saves on employee costs, it may be losing much more in revenues and gross margin if customers leave a store empty-handed because they can't find a knowledgeable employee to help them, stated [Marshall Fisher](#)⁶, professor of operations and information management at the University of Pennsylvania.

The previously mentioned *WWD* article (titled: "Think Tank: Weighing the Risk of Employee-Owned Devices on the Sales Floor"), quotes Robert Half as saying, "36% of CIOs considered a lack of employee knowledge and skills around data security as the most significant security risk for their business. In view of this grim security outlook, 97% of CIOs are looking at new ways to secure their company from data breaches. But how does one essentially manage the need for employee flexibility (BYOD) with the need for control?"

ABOUT INCITE

The Mobile Associate Communications Platform

The mobile-first INCITE app helps train associates via state-of-the-art features including:

- Video without streaming
- Drag and drop publishing
- Branded experiences
- Real-time data
- Quick and easy deployment
- Security and scalability

In addition to providing a consistent training experience across multiple locations, the INCITE platform provides managers and executives with data-rich metrics, including progress completing training materials and scores achieved on certifications. They can then measure that data against key performance indicators at levels ranging from individual employees to the entire organization, using that data as part of employee assessments. The platform can track completion dates for courses and prompt employees and managers when training deadlines are near. INCITE allows sales associates to become true ambassadors, own their own personalized development and build long-term relationships with their managers and customers.

The company added, “These personal devices are not necessarily embedded with security mechanisms. Once connected to the network, they can access critical company data, and act as a sitting channel for miscreants to access valuable corporate information. Imagine a scenario where a work email is hacked through a personal mobile device, and critical client information is stolen and sold to competition. Millions of dollar’s worth of data is at stake, not to mention the hit to the brand.”

When weighing the pros and cons of training apps that run on associates’ own phones, according to the WWD article, retailers should ask themselves:

- Is my IT department equipped to track BYOD behavior – and handle an associated data breach?
- Does each device have enough storage to run my BYOD app? If not, who pays to increase it?
- How do we remove private information from an employee’s device once off the payroll?
- Who pays for work-related data usage, and how is it accurately measured?
- If non-exempt employees use their devices at home for work-related activities, does the time accumulated put us in danger of violating work-and-hour issues addressed by the Fair Labor Standards Act?
- Who’s responsible for the device if broken, lost or stolen while in the store?
- Will today’s Gen Y be able to resist the most recent Snapchat and Instagram posts or urgent text from their friends? And will your customer think that’s what they’re doing on their personal device anyway?

Mobile POS and other more modern retail solutions are built to excel on a tablet, not an associate’s cell phone, especially ones two-plus years old. As such, best-in-class training and communications apps

designed for mobile POS are a retailer’s “Holy Grail.” They are PCI-compliant, optimized to minimize bandwidth impact on the network, run on a store’s same secure network as its POS, and can deliver proprietary, non-streaming video for ultimate associate engagement and retention. (See INCITE Sidebar.)

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RetailNext

Competitive to the Last Mile

Retail associates truly are the most valuable asset to a brand, just as they are to shoppers and their frontline experiences; viewing – and treating – them as such is a key to your brand’s growth and prosperity, according to the *RetailNext* blog.

Therefore, if – as stated in Gallup’s report on coaching – fully engaged customers represent a 23% premium in wallet share, profitability, revenue and relationship growth over the average customer, then specialized retail training apps that perfect that engagement really do matter!

A powerful, retail-specific, non-vanilla, mobile-first training tool that helps instruct and nurture, and communicate consistently in real time with hundreds and thousands of in-store employees across a chain positions retailers to be highly profitable and competitive to the last mile.



Footnotes:

1. <https://www.mytotalretail.com/article/retailers-losing-customers-over-employee-experiences-and-training/>
2. <https://www.gallup.com/workplace/245867/secret-coaching-employees-clock-ticking.aspx>
3. <https://retailnext.net/en/blog/retails-new-sales-associate>
4. <https://wwd.com/business-news/business-features/think-tank-brand-ambassadors-1202626250/>
5. <https://retailtouchpoints.com/topics/store-operations/exclusive-q-a-why-the-modern-workforce-needs-coaches-not-bosses>
6. <https://hbr.org/2019/01/retailers-are-squandering-their-most-potent-weapons>