

Focus on the experience

Give employees the tools to help your customers learn about new technology

INTERVIEWED BY MARK SCOTT

Employees play a vital role in helping your customers understand and get comfortable with new technology, says Aaron M. Barnhart, Senior Vice President and Retail Sales Leader at Westfield Bank.

“When your employees demonstrate confidence as they use and answer questions about new products and services, they empower customers with the same self-assurance,” Barnhart says. “It enables customers to see past the fear and understand the benefits that the new technology can provide.”

As technology continues to expand exponentially on all fronts, many businesses are faced with the challenge of creating a retail experience that blends technology and human interaction. The goal is to create a superior customer experience, but that’s not always easy with the varying degrees of comfort that customers have with technology.

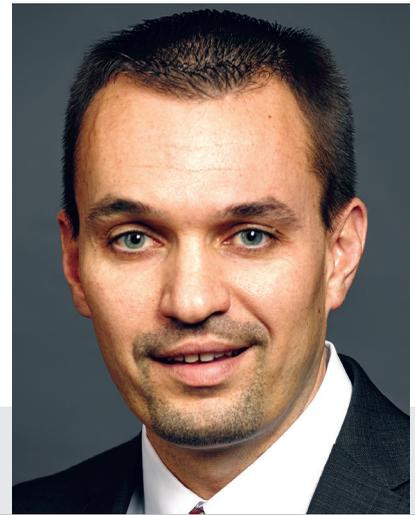
“You want your customers to buy, not be sold on what you offer,” Barnhart says. “You don’t want to push the widget of the week to show that you’re on the cutting edge. Educate and offer the conveniences of technology so customers can decide if it is a fit for their needs.”

Smart Business spoke with Barnhart about how to create a blended experience that satisfies customers from all points of view.

How can technology enhance the relationship you have with your customers?

Many customers still enjoy the opportunity to come into a store or office and have a face-to-face meeting with the people who represent a particular business. As business leaders, you can’t put a price tag on those relationships and technology

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doesn’t mean they have to go away. What it does provide is an opportunity to focus on more important matters.

If you go to your bank and you’re depositing a stack of checks, technology affords the opportunity to make the deposit a very small part of your visit. Instead, you’re able to spend more time talking about your company’s growth plan and how the bank can help you move it forward. You can still have those conversations and reduce the amount of time it takes to manage other tasks that are important, but don’t require any dialogue.

One of the problems with self-service technology is that it can create a feeling for customers that they are being pushed out the door or that you’re looking to reduce your staff. That’s not the goal of most companies, however, and that message needs to be communicated to customers.

How does your approach to technology help customers feel more comfortable?

It starts with the education of your employees. If you’re opening a new location that has enhanced technological capabilities, it’s best to roll everything out in stages. You begin by introducing the new systems to your team and allowing them to see, touch and use the software or equipment. Have support teams in place to offer training or to answer questions.

Then you have a session where your team can use the new systems in a live environment, but without any customers. Again, there is an opportunity to learn and to ask questions.

Next, you could do a soft opening where you are open for business, but you’re not publicizing your new offerings. There are always glitches when you roll out a new program or system and those can be resolved with less pressure. At the final stage after you’ve worked through the problems, you’re ready to go live and market your new capabilities to maximize the opportunity.

What else can you do to earn customer loyalty?

If you talk about being a community business and cultivating relationships, you need to take actions that reflect those promises. Get your senior management team involved in community events and with the local chambers of commerce. Be part of the community and be involved in efforts to make it better. When you show that you care about the area in which you do business, you show customers that you’re about more than just making money for your business. That can go a long way toward helping customers to feel good about turning to you for the products and services you offer. ●