



PERSPECTIVES

Swipe Right

RETAIL GURU JUDY BELL EXPLORES THE POWER OF REVIVING RETAIL RELATIONSHIPS

→ **A SHOPPER STEPS INTO** your store with fingers or feet, online or in a physical space. You've engaged their interest, now how can you begin to build a relationship that lasts? For years, we've talked about the importance of offering shoppers an "experience," but what's next? What goes beyond a one-night stand toward developing a loyal and trusted relationship?

Looking back in time, relationship building was at the core of shopping. Successful sales people kept little black books with their customers' names, phone numbers, sizes, brand and style preferences. When they unpacked the season's new arrivals, they would pre-shop the assortment and invite their clients in to try the selections. Andy Markopoulos, a legendary leader at Dayton-Hudson, understood the importance of personal connection, and he did that through visual merchandising and store design. "He treats people who come into the store as guests, and the way he does his store design and the way he encourages all of the visuals, is to really make the people who shop the stores feel very good about being there," says Judy Neidermaier in a Markopoulos tribute on Vimeo.

Everybody loved to buy something at Dayton's: the carefully wrapped treasures in tissue paper always smelled so lovely, and all were proud to carry the package with the coveted Dayton's logo. Delighted shoppers knew they had something special. In this highly regarded retail space, Andy inspired visual merchandisers to create vignettes that instantly caught shoppers' attention—and often even drew out a smile. Andy and his team would build relationships with shoppers through mannequins and props, elegant furnishings and signage. And the sales team in the store was so carefully trained that they built on those visuals by offering expert advice and making eye contact when speaking to shoppers. How often today do cashiers look at you when they say thank you?

Recently, I was shopping for a pair of jeans at a nearby national department store, which in fact, used to be a Dayton's store. There were no salespeople in the denim department, so I selected a few styles of jeans and searched for the fitting rooms. Once inside, the process involved a few trips out



JUDY BELL
FOUNDER
ENERGETIC RETAIL

"In the past, time-trusted visual techniques, coupled with expert sales training and adequate staffing, were a staple in retailers' success stories."

onto the floor, back and forth, to find more styles and sizes. Thirty minutes later, I was ready to make a purchase and there were still no salespeople in sight. This was not on a Minnesota Polar Vortex day; it was in the middle of summer. In time, I eventually found a checkout in a neighbouring department, I made my purchase, and then "swiped left" on shopping that store in the future. It was simply too much work.

Contrast that with my visit to Evereve a few months later. It was my first time in the store; I went in to exchange a gift. One of the sales team members approached me and told me that she had a few styles of jeans that were a perfect fit for my body type. After some gentle persuasion and a friendly chat, she escorted me to the fitting room and I began to try on several styles. I couldn't believe the difference in fit compared to those I had

purchased in the department store without assistance. I was having fun, too—these jeans took 10 years off my age! Who knew the fountain of youth could be styled into a jean? I walked out with two pairs, and went back the next season for two more. I "swiped right" on Evereve and their expert team of jean fitters, and I've recommended the store to friends who now shop there. That "first date" built a relationship of trust in the brand's unique expertise, coupled with their warm, fun and engaging approach. I mattered, and they were clear about it. They wanted me to look my best.

I think today many retailers have "thrown the baby out with the bathwater." In the past, time-trusted visual techniques, coupled with expert sales training and adequate staffing, were a staple in retailers' success stories, but today they are too often left behind and replaced by information and data at HQ. At checkouts, sales people are required to pitch charge accounts and ask for zip codes. Sometimes they must ask if you want to round up the dollar amount of your purchase for charity. These rote questions wipe out the possibility of any "real" dialogue and are even annoying to some. There are shoppers who would rather just pay for their stuff and leave through the nearest exit. A properly trained sales team member can recognize that and speedily move the shopper out the door, but not if they have to recite a litany of sales pitches.

It all seems like an easy fix for brick-and-mortar stores—relationships are part of their heritage. Some are taking up the charge, like Kroger, which in 2018 announced they were adding 11,000 team members to store staffs to emphasize customer service. But what about online shopping? If Andy Markopoulos were here today, I wonder what message his version of online shopping would convey? Onliners *are* trying: clients' preferences are recorded when they shop online, and they receive messages from Amazon, like "Recommended for You," and from Barnes and Noble, like: "Because you purchased 'Little French Bistro,'" etc. I think these suggestions and gentle nudges do work, but so much more can be done both online and in-store by looking through a new lens: that of retail relationships.

Retailer and shopper connections are important. Consider that loneliness is at epidemic levels in the United States and, possibly, worldwide. Last year, in the United Kingdom, Prime Minister Theresa May appointed a Minister of Loneliness. Isn't it a good time to look at shoppers realistically and wonder about how Andy would have put a smile on their faces? How would he have encouraged them to "swipe right?"