

# From Fail to Sale

Training and reward programs ensure knowledgeable associates — and higher sales

by SANDY SMITH

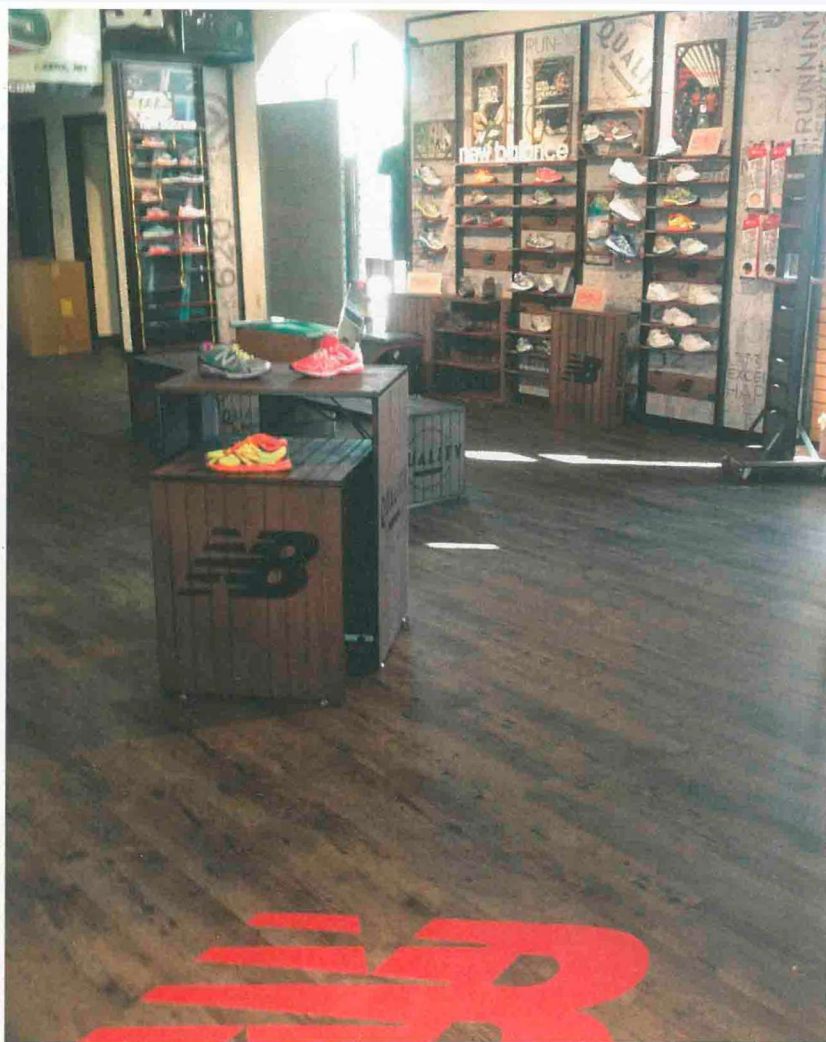
It's imperative that retailers deliver what customers want. But these days, customers are demanding more than just products — they want sales associates who know the product and category and can help select the right item or recommend an alternative, according to results of a survey released last fall by eXperticity. It's even more crucial in areas like sporting goods, hunting/fishing and prestige beauty, on which the survey focused.

Take footwear and apparel manufacturer New Balance. The company designs its products with a specific end use in mind. A customer can't simply slip a foot inside a shoe, jump around for a minute to see how it feels and walk away confident that she has the right item.

Complicating the matter, New Balance sells its products through its own stores as well as other footwear retailers. Add in full-time, part-time and seasonal associates and a product line that is constantly undergoing updates, and the importance of knowledgeable associates is clear.

"We as a brand need to make sure retail sales associates are well-versed on 'updates' and changes to key models," says Jon Hogan, New Balance's sales planning coordinator. "Customers demand a certain level of expertise. Negative reviews based on a perceived lack of knowledge or training can impact a brand, account and shoe very easily."

New Balance works with eXperticity's 3Point5 training module to make sure associates are current on the latest product information. eXperticity



also offers ways to reach industry professionals through contests and product discounts, not only building up the brand's reputation with influencers but also gaining feedback on the products that can then be shared with the brand.

## ASK THE EXPERT

Goal Zero, which creates solar power packs, panels and gear like flashlights and speakers, relies on sales associates to help consumers discover their products and the technology behind it.

That's why Goal Zero uses eXperticity programs to offer training, product discounts and rewards so that those working in stores can explore and field test its products.

"People who are working at an REI or another similar store

are [the] people who are really selling our product," says Alisa Hawkins, Goal Zero sales account manager. "We wanted to make sure that they're trained and they have access to products. Anytime they have used a product, they're more likely to recommend it."

That personal product experience, coupled with the knowledge gained through training, can help associates get up to speed quickly on both the





product and the broader uses of solar.

“People have to not only be trained on the product and why we are different,” Hawkins says, but also “how solar works and how you can recharge our battery packs.”

Goal Zero also uses eXperticity’s ProMotive, which connects companies with influential brand advocates online, increasing brand visibility by offering discounts to high-profile product users. Hawkins says their input is taken back to the engineers and product development team to understand how products are used in the field.

That can be a winning formula. The eXperticity study showed that those who don’t find the right information from a sales associate are most likely to turn to someone they perceive to be an expert: Seeking out expert advice (72 percent) tops online research (71 percent), online user reviews (66 percent) and traditional product reviews (62 percent) for where consumers turn next.

## CONSISTENT MESSAGING

Laurel Anne Harward is director of education for StriVectin Operating Company, which has skin care products StriVectin sold in retail locations and Nia24 sold by plastic surgeons, dermatologists and medical spas. Using eXperticity to train these two vastly different audiences has proven extremely beneficial.

“The ways they each approach the products are different,” Harward says. “In the cosmetics department, word of mouth is stronger. In a medical office, they may have five physicians around town, but aestheticians and office staff are not necessarily cohorts with other offices. We have to work a little bit harder to increase participation.”

Still, the overall goal of education remains the same. “What we have to get out there is what sets our brand apart . . . . At the end of the day, we’re about our patented technology and the amount of clinical proof behind our products that proves the most important thing: that they work. That’s not a



story easily told on a product box.”

Before working with eXperticity, it’s largely where that story remained. StriVectin offered training and plenty of printed materials, but both methods had shortfalls. “I train our field team,” Harward says. “The field team trains the freelancers, who go into the store and train the sales associates. . . . the message can get muddled. With eXperticity, we’re able to deliver a more consistent and current message.”

Relying solely on print materials proved ineffective, especially as learning trends move increasingly to media and virtual opportunities. Then there’s the high cost of printing and shipping the material, “which may have been thrown in a desk once it was seen by one person or three years old when it was pulled out,” Harward says. “The interactive component that eXperticity offers allows trainees to dive into the science and get to know it like we do.”

With a company focused on the cutting edge of science and ingredient technology, using an online tool for education reinforces that idea, Harward says. “We haven’t totally given up on classroom training. That’s still important, but now we enable 24/7 access. We’ve seen a lift in sales, but it’s mainly benefited our reputation of who we are and how we want to be seen.”

## MEETING THE DEMAND

eXperticity finds that those who work for many of these retailers do so because they’re passionate about the activity — and those who are passion-

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ate about the job bring big dividends. The eXperticity survey showed that 54 percent of retailers felt training was vital to retention, while associates were twice as likely to say they were satisfied with their jobs when they could meet customer needs.

New Balance employees “are constantly asking when our course updates will be released, what the next contest we will host will be,” Hogan says, noting “a positive correlation between associates who take the training on eXperticity and sell through of product.”

That same desire for training and access to products is clear at Goal Zero, which saw 7,000 sales associates train to learn more about the company’s products in 2013. One of the top selling retailers put 2,000 of its associates through the training — and it’s paying off. “We’ve seen the growth with eXperticity go hand in hand,” Hawkins says. “We don’t think we’d have been able to grow as quickly without that training piece behind it.”

Investing in associates through training and access to products brings tremendous value, says eXperticity CEO Tom Stockham. “This kind of more energized, more personal, more experienced person drives enormous value — higher conversion rate, bigger basket size, less likely returns. Those are not marginal improvements. They’re massive improvements.” **STORES**

Sandy Smith grew up working in her family’s grocery store, where the only handheld was a pricemarker with labels.