

IDEAS 2 GO

DRIVING IN SALES

Square One Markets reached into the past for a new twist on customer service.

BY SARAH HAMAKER

Staying relevant in today's fast-changing marketplace is challenging, especially for the convenience store industry. A convenience retailer who doesn't listen to what customers want will likely fall behind the competition.

For Square One Markets, customer and employee feedback has always been an essential ingredient to help the retailer stay ahead of the competition. "We're the kind of company that's looking for ways to improve and to keep current in our industry and neighborhoods," said Lisa Dell'Alba, president and CEO of the Bethlehem, Pennsylvania-based chain. "We take our feedback very seriously."

It's that attention to listening that has been the secret of the chain's growth from a single store 44 years ago to nine locations today, and two with drive-thru windows. Today, Dell'Alba continues the company's legacy of innovation with an ear to hearing the concerns and suggestions of customers and employees.

A New-Old Idea

One of Dell'Alba's objectives is to look for ways to improve customer service in all aspects of the business. She stumbled upon one innovative idea almost by accident. When her son was born in 2011, Dell'Alba started calling the closest Square One Market to place occasional pick-up orders. "I'd call the store, give my order and ask to pick it up behind the store because I didn't want to have to bring in the baby," she said.

It eventually dawned on Dell'Alba that she couldn't be the only person in town who needed this type of service. When a drive-thru at that location proved unworkable because of street traffic patterns, she tried something different. "We offered full-service gasoline on Monday afternoons at no extra charge to



boost gas sales, and I thought, why not offer motorists the option of placing an order for in-store items with the station attendant at the pump as well?" The idea, she said, was soon executed.

The employees use a walkie-talkie system to convey orders to staff inside the store, which are fulfilled and delivered back out to the vehicle. The attendants also take payment back and forth. "On days we offer the service, our customers are pretty evenly split between those coming for the full-service gasoline and those coming for the curbside pickup," Dell'Alba said. "It's very popular, especially in cold weather." And the large elderly population in the community also benefits from the curbside delivery.

Initially, the hardest part in launching the program was getting customers to actually use it. "We had a lot of people who looked at us funny when we

To help boost gas sales, Square One Markets offered full-service on Mondays. Soon after, staff began placing and delivering orders for customers at the pump on in-store items.

offered to pump their gas for free," she said. "We found that just by approaching people, they were taken aback. But now that our customers understand we're doing it for free, they have embraced it."

Today, the service is so well-liked that Dell'Alba had to expand it to Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays from noon to 5 pm. Busy times include the lunch hour and from 3 pm to 5 pm. Square One Markets doesn't advertise the program, relying instead on word of mouth. "During the past two years, we've seen an increase in gasoline on those days," she said. "We had been getting beaten up by bigger chains on gasoline sales, but with this program, we've regained some of those losses."

A bonus has been the increased interaction staff has with customers. "Our customers like the dialogue with our employees," said Dell'Alba, noting that some enjoy talking to the attendant while he pumps gas. "That location has become one in which the team members have really gotten to know the community."

The program hasn't provided a huge lift in in-

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store sales, but that's ok, she explains: "What it has done is provided the convenience and interaction that had been missing in this neighborhood with our store."

Customer Focus

With the success of the full-service gas program, Dell'Alba has her eye on transforming some of the other locations with more service-oriented initiatives. Some of her ideas harken back to the past. "At our interstate store, I'm working on putting in a different kind of foodservice program. As part of that, I'm considering having employees on roller skates taking and delivering orders to customers on the forecourt," she said.

Other suggestions look to the future. For example, she's also intrigued by Gilbarco's Applause Media feature that would let customers order a variety of items, such as candy, tobacco, food and drinks, at the pump. The customer would then either enter the store to pick up the order or go through a drive-thru. "I like the idea of making it easier for customers to get gas and in-store purchases together," said Dell'Alba.

Overall, her goal is "to continue to look for ways to bridge the gap between forecourt customers and in-store customers. We are always looking for ways to bring activity out to forecourt."

With the advent of spring and warmer weather, Square One Market stores will once again offer product sampling as part of its curbside program. As for the future, the company's focus stays firmly fixed on making its stores as customer-friendly as possible. **NACS**

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