

DIY STORES

DIY Stores is a nationwide chain that offers every tool and supply for repairing and maintaining a home. Shoppers at DIY can find paints and paintbrushes, screwdrivers and lumber, pliers and electrical conduit, spades and shovels, and much more. Besides the wide variety under one roof, what sets DIY apart is its sales associates. The company hires avid do-it-yourselfers and retired trade workers, assigns them to work in departments where their know-how is relevant, provides training in new products and creative methods, and pays them a little more than they could earn by working for another retailer. The company also makes available fact sheets and lists of tips and building ideas. Together these efforts make DIY Stores a place where shoppers can go to get ideas and advice, so they get more than supplies for a project—they get all the ingredients they need for their project to succeed.

Over the past couple of decades, however, consumers have found an alternative to getting advice in a store: many prefer to do their research online, comfortably seated at a computer. If consumers can use a search engine or chat in an online community to figure out the best way to fix a leaky toilet or make a small bedroom look airy and bright, why would they trek into a store to ask? The answer, DIY's management feared, was that they wouldn't bother. If true, that trend placed DIY's competitive advantage at risk. The retailer needed to change with the times.

DIY's solution was to go where the consumers were: online. Management decided the company needed to supplement its in-store experts with online experts, employees who shared the same kinds of information on the Internet as they did in the stores. The company's corporate communications department was charged with developing a plan for this effort.

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The department's people were used to thinking of corporate communications as something that originates at headquarters, so they initially thought the most efficient approach would be to hire a team of writers to work in offices at headquarters, blogging about new products and maintenance tips. But when they presented this plan to top management, one of the vice presidents raised a question: The company's salespeople were its base of knowledge. Why bring in new people? Why not figure out a way to use the human assets the company already had?

The corporate communications people went back to work on the plan. Probably some of the sales associates already were using the Internet themselves and knew how to write a blog and participate in social networking. Probably some of them had the necessary combination of helpfulness and writing skills. So they considered identifying those employees and inviting them to take jobs at headquarters. But as the group discussed this idea, they realized it had a flaw. If employees left the stores, they would no longer be seeing, selling, and watching customers' reactions to products. They would lose the hands-on and face-to-face experiences that kept them up to date and in touch with consumers. Also, consumers would quickly figure out that the online exchanges were not with a real DIY sales associate but with someone who had become a call center employee or professional communicator.

So the team arrived at an unusual plan. The company would identify Internet-savvy sales associates, but it wouldn't remove them from the stores. Rather, the associates who accepted the new position would work three days a week in a store and two days a week in an office, with their schedules staggered so that the online community would be active seven days a week. The company's executives were enthusiastic about this plan.

DIY contacted store managers in cities where it has regional offices. The store managers recommended employees they thought would deliver effective help online, and a team of recruiters interviewed these candidates and selected two dozen to provide an online presence. The typical employee selected had eight years of experience with DIY and submitted an excellent writing sample. Meanwhile, the company built an online "Do It with Us" web page where customers can submit questions, read tips, share ideas, and find links to information about new products available at DIY's stores.

After a three-day training program, the sales associates started the online conversation with DIY. Within months, they and the site's visitors had started thousands of conversation threads. And in an unexpected development, the sales associates have also become a valued source of knowledge for DIY's other employees. In stores, at headquarters, and in the regional offices, if someone wants product or project information, they often start their search at the "Do It with Us" web page.