

Managing Diverse Generations in a Retail Setting

Julia just graduated from Valley Community College with her associate degree in Business Administration. She is anxious to start her new position as an entry-level manager of the Electronics Department at Everything's Here Inc., a retailer that offers customers clothing, pharmaceuticals, food, automotive, house wares, electronics, small appliances, toys, etc.

Julia, who is 34, has worked for the retail giant as a sales associate and then assistant manager in the clothing department over the last 5 years while attending college part-time and raising her two young children. During each of the past 4 years she has received a store customer service award. She is techno-literate and can multitask. When Julia heard of a job opening for an entry-level manager in the Electronics Department of Everything's Here Inc., she applied and received the position—she had the associate's degree, assistant manager experience at the store, and excellent customer service skills.

The Electronics Department has a range of products including CDs, mobile phones, laptop computers, video games, MP3 players and flat-screen TVs. The department's 3 full-time sales associates, Ethel, Larry, and Rick, and six part-time sales associates will report to Julia. The sales associates are responsible for aiding customers in purchase decisions, using the cash register for sales, and taking inventory. Julia relies on the full-time associates to help her meet the sales goals for the department. At Everything's Here Inc. there are no sales commissions for the employees.

Upon taking the position, Harold Lee, the store manager, told Julia that she needs to increase the department's sales and improve her employees' customer service skills. He said that he has received many complaints about the lack of attention given to customers in Electronics. Julia is expected to "turn the sales figures and the customer comments—positive" within the next six months.

Ethel, age 70, has worked at Everything's Here Inc. for 20 years, with 18 of those years in sales in the fabric and crafts department—a department that was closed at Everything's Here Inc. due to lack of revenue. Over the last two years, Ethel has been transferred from department to department. She has been in the Electronics Department now for one year and limits her work to assisting customers

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with CD and video selections. Many times Ethel is the only sales person on the floor and when asked a question about the other technological equipment in the department, she tells the customers to “come back when the younger people are working—they understand this stuff!” Ethel is pleasant with customers and hard working. She told the upper managers at Everything’s Here Inc. that she wants to work for a few more years because she receives health benefits that cover the secondary insurance under Medicare for herself and her husband, who is in an Alzheimer’s unit in the local nursing home.

Ethel had great difficulty learning the new computer inventory control program that was recently installed in the store to check if items are in stock. She has tested the patience of several people, including the last manager, who tried to teach her how to use the program. She does like the personal attention, and tries hard, but has not been successful. At work, when Ethel watched the customer service training videos supplied by corporate training, she fell asleep. She cannot use e-mail to communicate with Julia from home since she doesn’t have a computer at home and she doesn’t know how to use email or instant messaging. When Ethel is at home, she shuts her phone off so her attention is not interrupted when watching television. “After all... I can’t watch television and talk on the phone!”

Larry, age 20, has been working at Everything’s Here Inc. for two years since graduating from high school. He was told by his parents “get out of the house, get a job and quit playing video games.” On his job application, Larry stated that he was qualified to work in the Electronics Department because he was an avid “gamer” and “an expert at text messages.” Mr. Lee thought that Larry was the ideal employee since “Larry is young and knows about computers.” While at work, Larry gets so caught up in checking his messages and learning to use the newly arrived PDAs and video games, that he ignores customers needing assistance. He perceives that his activities are work related. After all, he must be an expert on the equipment/games in order to sell them.

Larry prefers helping young customers because he believes they are more “techno-savvy” and know what they are looking for in terms of games or technology. He doesn’t have a lot of patience with customers, particularly those who need assistance understanding mobile phones and accessories. Larry is often seen using his mobile “smart” phone to send text messages to friends before ringing up a customer’s sales. “This’ll take only a minute” Larry says to the customers, and quickly enters a message before ringing up the sales. He does not see text messaging as intrusive or time consuming—“Heck! It’s just like talking—it’s quicker and less annoying!” Larry only wants to communicate with Julia through text messaging or emails since he is connected to email and social sites “almost 24/7.” He has told her “Don’t use the phone to contact me... I’m usually texting... that’s the way I like to communicate.”

Rick, age 51, took a job as sales associate at Everything’s Here Inc. when the local appliance store where he worked for 20 years closed. He enjoyed working at the appliance store because he was selling kitchen and laundry appliances, TVs and stereos—equipment with which he was familiar. He liked spending time with customers and hearing their stories. In fact, many of his customers frequently return to make other purchases. Although he lacks experience with sophisticated communication technologies, Mr. Lee wanted to give Rick “a chance” in Electronics. Rick knows the basics of working a computer for word processing, emails, and surfing the net. Mr. Lee was heard saying “At Rick’s age, he probably knows how to use technology—after all, everyone has a computer and smart phone today—even me and I’m 60!” Rick does well selling TVs, but not the other equipment in Electronics. He tends to stay near the TVs and does not rotate around the department.

When Rick is approached by a customer with a technical question, he goes out of his way to find Julia, Larry, or one of the younger part-time associates. He introduces them to customers as “my young knowledgeable colleagues.” He will go online to find the answer or use the computerized “Frequently Asked Q & A” module developed by Julia for the Electronics Department staff only if no one else is around and the customer needs an answer to make a purchase decision.

After completing her first week working the various shifts with the 3 full time employees assigned to her, Julia realizes that there may be generational issues that are affecting customer service in her department.