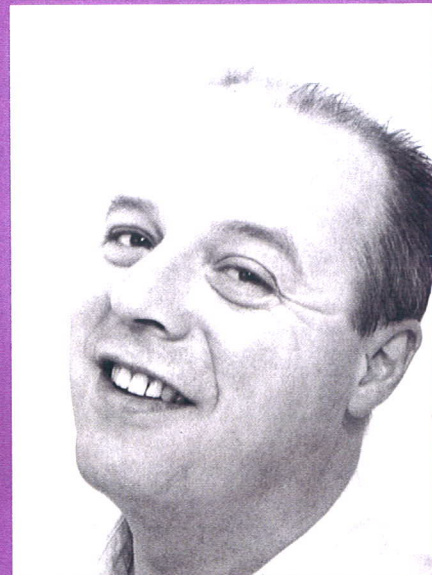


Keeping up appearances

Nick Blyth of O-Two Maintenance is ensuring in-store fitness regimes don't pass in a fad



Inefficient & incomplete store maintenance affects brand image and profit margins. With economic markets experiencing a time of uncertainty, and consumers feeling the ripples of the credit crunch, retail was the sector offering the most profit warnings at the beginning of the year.

Retail outlets need to be hyper-efficient, true to brand and visually effective. Inefficient maintenance is not an indiscretion that will pass un-noticed; it's a potential blow to brand image and desirability. With employees constantly immersed in the store environment, it is all too easy to forget the perspective of the customer, and to ignore the negative impact that poor attention to detail can bring. If it looks like a sale shop, sale margins are what retailers can expect.

Why not take that customer journey with their eyes to assess what they see?

With a number of factors affecting consumer confidence, brands need to ensure that the customer experience is seamless and measures up to expectations, selling the right image. Dirty carpets or windows, poor lighting & planning, broken fixtures or displays, scruffy handwritten signs or a general tired feeling can creep up on a store, significantly impairing the brand message. Maintenance addresses the bigger questions whilst attending to the crucial details. A well-considered maintenance service is not just about the detail, it ensures you are addressing the bigger picture.

Is the store doing enough to ensure that the physical condition reflects the

image being sold by head office and the marketing drive? How often is the store reviewed from the perspective of a new customer, and from the other side of the cash desk? Is the store meeting all the statutory requirements, and if so, can it be proven? How much time is spent on maintenance and effectively managing records – and is it time spent well? Is the in-store space working to maximum effect: is back of house complimenting front of house? Are efforts being focussed or centralised to get the best value?

The irony is that a fear of costs and time involvement often costs businesses more in time and money in the end. Facilities management is hardly the most glamorous side of retail, but its function is to help facilitate the main purpose of the business. A good retail maintenance provider will be only too pleased to have the opportunity to visit you for an appraisal and review of what you do and how you are doing it.

Store managers have endless vying considerations, and can't be expected to have expert knowledge in all areas, so building a trusting relationship with a good supplier, allowing them to work on your behalf can mean that the stress of the inevitable retail problems can be passed on to a fully answerable maintenance team – from stock issues, space allocation, security, technology changes (and spaghetti cables syndrome), etc, etc.

Indeed in today's world of corporate responsibility and scrutiny, meeting and staying abreast of statutory and health

and safety requirements can be time-consuming and have serious consequences associated with failure. If upkeep issues and costs are only considered from a localised perspective, efficiencies are likely to suffer. A centralised maintenance system ensures that bureaucracy is minimised with trends and information sharing allowing for greater pre-empting of problems, and responsiveness as well as value through economies of scale and resources. This can be achieved through centralised helpdesk facilities. Information is kept on central databases and is accessible at short notice.

The benefits are those sought by all retailers, but often not attained:

- Brand image
- A better looking store
- Cost efficiencies
- Improved customer service

Are you constantly reviewing your store to ensure that you are always enhancing the customer experience?

As your store or wider brand evolves, are your operating approaches keeping pace? This is no time for complacency. With the comfort of the Internet, consumers need a strong reason to leave home.

Take a walk through your store from the street to the till. What do your customers see. Does the experience reflect your brand?

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