

## Retail Associate Profiles

By Doug Fleener

One of the mistakes I probably made when managing a store was not looking hard enough at the individual contributions of each retail associate. I had a tendency to look more at the outcome of the store as a whole rather than how each individual's contribution added up to the store total. Even when I had individual sales data I'm not sure I had enough individual accountability in the store.

With my work since then on designing sales and customer experience systems, I've come to learn that not only do we need to look at each individual's contribution but to better understand the individuals themselves. Retail associates can be categorized into one of five retail associate profiles.

### The Doer

Doers do what is asked of them. Highly skilled doers can be some of your best salespeople. They rarely complain and are happy to learn new skills. They are consistent in their approach and strive to improve. They are usually great team players and are good representatives of your brand. Some doers may not be as good at their job as you would like, but they are very coachable. Chances are a lot your staff will fall into this category. The best way to manage doers is to constantly be practicing the skills necessary to improve their selling and customer service skills. Most doers will rise or fall to the level of execution of the management team.

### The Slider

The slider does whatever it takes to get by. Hence, they slide by. A slider often masquerades as a doer. They often talk a good game and on the surface appear to be performing well. The slider is a master at making things appear better than they are. Sliders thrive in organizations that don't report individual sales or hold individuals accountable for their own results. Sliders rarely go above and beyond for the store or the customer. Sliders usually offer great potential but never achieve it. Sliders will cost a store sales due to lost opportunities. They often do what is asked of them only if a member of management is watching.

### The Hider

The hider is neither a good nor a bad performer. Like the slider, they get by. The difference is that the hider keeps a low profile and survives in organizations by carefully staying under the radar. Managers like hidiers because they don't cause any problems and appear to be doing the job. The problem is that they don't do their job particularly well. They don't even try. The difference between a slider and a hider is that the slider probably has the skills to do the job but chooses not to make the effort. A hider is punching the clock and looking for a paycheck. Hidiers thrive in stores where the manager doesn't spend much time on the floor. I've seen an entire staff made up of hidiers and sliders because of poor management. Good managers can probably turn sliders into doers, but it is more challenging to turn hidiers into doers.

### **The Blamer**

The blamer is a master at explaining away poor results. Blamers are actually more prevalent in management than in retail associates. Sliders who get promoted into management frequently become blamers. Or maybe sliders who are exposed as sliders morph into blamers. Either way, blamers never accept personal responsibility. Everything is someone or something else's fault. They always seem to have the "difficult" customer and have a different excuse every time they are late. They always complain about the sales goals or the low store traffic. Blamers are the worst type of employees to have because they're a virus in the store. They're usually gossipers and will undermine other associates and the management team. When blamers are allowed to stay on a staff they bring down the performance of every other employee, especially the sliders and hiders. Strong managers don't have blamers because they don't allow it.

### **The Leader**

Leaders are passionate, engaging and energetic. They create opportunities and make everyone around them better. Customers naturally gravitate to them. Doers look up to them; sliders, hiders and blamers are threatened by them. Leaders create their own opportunities and as a result are your best sales people. They sometimes have a competitive spirit that may turn others off, except for other leaders who love the challenge. It takes a strong manager to manage a leader. Sometimes the leader is headstrong and can be perceived as difficult to work with. Their desire to succeed can sometimes result in stepped-on toes and bruised egos among other employees. Leaders hate to be held back by mediocrity, so weaker managers sometimes label the leader as a troublemaker. Weak managers rarely hire leaders. This is the very reason underperforming stores struggle to turn it around. If you have one or two leaders in your store you're blessed. If you have more than that then you're probably the Gandhi of retail management.

Our challenge of course is we often don't know which type we've hired until after the fact. Here are some suggestions to help you hire Leaders and Doers and to avoid getting stuck with Sliders, Hiders, and Blamers.

**1. Try to meet every person who asks for an application.** Don't make the mistake of letting the staff hand out applications. I think it is important to meet each person asking to work for you so you can see them in non-interview mode. While handing them the application, ask a few questions about why they are interested in your store. Leaders and Doers will probably be able to answer without hesitation because they specifically want to work at your store; they're not just looking for a job.

**2. Pay special attention to the energy level of your applicant during the interview.** I often share with my audiences that if a person can't "turn it on" for you during the interview, they're very unlikely to do it on the retail floor. No, I don't think every person we hire has to bounce off the walls during an interview, but if you don't feel any energy or passion then you're probably talking to a Hider. Some people don't interview well so it is up to you to put them at ease, but if they don't wow you in some way during the interview - keep looking. If they don't smile at you during a job interview they're not going to smile at many customers.

**3. Ask unexpected questions.** One of the mistakes hiring managers make during interviews is asking stock questions that everyone knows they're going to be asked. Examples include, "How would you handle an unhappy customer?" or "Why do you want to work here?" These are the questions that people are ready for, have prepared answers for, and don't really tell you much about the person. Here are a couple of my favorites unexpected questions that will help you identify the type of person you're interviewing:

*\* Who do you see as our toughest competition and how do we differ from them?* Listen carefully to the answer. Sliders and Hiders are in deep trouble with this question because they've never given it any thought. They're prepared for the usual questions because they always give the same answer, no matter where or with whom they are interviewing. Leaders will nail the answer, as will some Doers, but Sliders will babble and Hiders won't be able to answer it at all.

*\* Tell me about a time that you or a team you were on fell short of goal. What was the situation, what happened, and what did you learn from it?* This is a great question to identify a Blamer as they're not likely to take personal responsibility. Leaders and Doers might point out how others failed as well but will never blame others for their own failure. The person being interviewed is totally unprepared for a question like this. Give them time to think about it. They might be embarrassed they can't think of anything. If this happens more than once during an interview you should pass on the person as you need a more critical thinker on your team.

*\* Tell me about a time you had to deal with an extremely unhappy customer. What was the situation, why was the customer unhappy, and what was the outcome?* If the person is new to retail, substitute an unhappy friend or family member. What you're looking for is someone who can empathize with the customer as well as try to find a suitable solution. This question works because it's not about theory, it's about real life. Ask some probing questions so that you can better understand the applicant's thought process. Sliders and Hiders will share very little detail, a Blamer might fault company policy or even the customer, and Doers and Leaders will probably answer the question to your satisfaction.

**4. Last but not least, go out on the floor and roleplay.** You wouldn't buy a car without a test drive, why hire a retail associate without one? Have another employee play the role of the customer to take a little pressure off the applicant. Have the employee come into the store like a customer and have the applicant greet them and show them a specific product. While nerves can sometimes get in the applicant's way, you'll be able to tell whether talking to customers comes naturally or not. At the very least, you'll scare off Sliders and Hiders and maybe even some Blamers as it will be clear that you'll have high expectations of them.

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**About the author:** Doug Fleener is founder of the Dynamic Experiences Group. He is a veteran retailer with more than 25 years of hands-on retail experience with world-class retailers including Bose Corporation and The Sharper Image. He has also owned and operated his own specialty stores. His new book, *The Profitable Retailer: 56 surprisingly simple and effective lessons to boost your sales and profits* published by Acanthus Publishing is available at [www.dynamicexperiencesgroup.com](http://www.dynamicexperiencesgroup.com) or at Amazon.com.

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