

Staffing Your Store

It's all about the interview.

BY SUSAN JOHNSTON

Back-to-school season is approaching. An extra employee around the store would do wonders, but the stress of hiring someone new doesn't seem worth it. Think again. The key is to focus on the qualities you're looking for in an employee and then ask the right questions during an interview.

What do storeowners look for? Answers vary, but—dependability tops the list, even before dance experience. “To me, it's important for an employee to have a strong ethic and be very dependable,” says Carmen Rieck, owner of Dance Magic in St. George, UT. “You don't need someone with experience selling or a great background in dance, although it does help. You need somebody you can depend on. Everything else can be learned.”

Here are five tips that will help you conduct more effective interviews and find the employee who's right for your store.

1 TRY TO PUT THE APPLICANT AT EASE

Most people get nervous during job interviews. This can actually be a good sign, because it means they care about getting the job. But how can you distinguish someone with job interview jitters from an overly shy person who may not interact comfortably with customers?

“Most of the girls I interview either know us from coming to the store or I know them personally,” says Kathy Kosty, owner of All That Jazz in Wexford, PA. “But on an interview they're taken out of their comfort zone, so I always start by talking a little bit about my background and how I got into this, before jumping in. It takes the edge off.”

You might ask a few low-key questions to break the ice and assess the candidate's people skills. Try, “How do you know our store?” or “Where did you hear about the job opening?” You might even ask what they like to do on weekends. Their replies may not be relevant to their job performance, but their body language, including posture and eye contact, will offer hints about how they'll handle talking to customers. And they'll start to relax so you can get to know them.

2 EVALUATE PERSONALITY FIT

Trusting someone to work the cash register and deal with customers requires that they have the right blend of personality and reliability. Use the



Carmen Rieck, owner of Dance Magic in St. George, UT, with sales associate Lucia Berdaguer.

“You don't need someone with experience selling or a great background in dance, although it does help. You need somebody you can depend on.” —Carmen Rieck, Dance Magic

interview as an opportunity to gauge the candidate's character: Is she dependable? Smart? Friendly?

Paula Parkas, owner of Dancer's Image in Newton, MA, says her standout worker is a high school student who boxes competitively. “It's her work ethic,” says Parkas. “She's not a dancer, but she dresses well for the job, always asks, ‘What can I do next?’ and volunteers for projects. She handles sticky situations with grace. A lot of customers come in and say, ‘That girl is so good.’”

While Parkas admits that she would prefer dancers “because they understand the difference between the shoes,” she says that this employee's work ethic and eagerness to learn about dance won her over.

Lori Downs, owner of Dancer's Dream Closet in Farmington, NM, says she considers a candidate's personality first. “Somebody who's very friendly and outgoing will serve our customers better,” she says. “We can teach a person fit and fashion.”

One way to judge candidates' problem-solving and interpersonal skills is to describe a hypothetical situation and ask how they might respond. For example, a customer is irate because her credit card has been declined, a dancer is looking for a certain brand of jazz shoe that isn't in stock or a customer

comes in to browse just before closing time. Kosty feels she can learn a lot about candidates' maturity and responsibility by asking them how they would react. “I might also ask how a candidate would handle a customer who doesn't speak very highly of a particular studio,” she says.

3 CONSIDER CANDIDATES YOU KNOW

Many retailers feel more comfortable hiring people they already know. When Downs opened Dancer's Dream Closet, she offered a job to a “dance grandma” she'd previously worked with at a bank. Downs had been impressed with the woman's work ethic and was confident that she'd apply those same qualities to her role at the store. “In four years, she'd missed only one day of work,” she says. “That impressed me.”

When Rieck bought Dance Magic four years ago, she hired her niece Lucia to work part time. Rieck says she knew her outgoing attitude would make her a great salesperson. Most of Parkas' employees were her customers first. “They have enthusiasm for the store and for what we do here,” she says.

Hiring people you know can have pitfalls. Sometimes friends or family members may feel store



All That Jazz owner Kathy Kosty (center) with assistant manager Wendy Wozniak (left) and manager Susan Schenk (right).

policies don't apply to them. Address this directly. Hold a formal job interview with each candidate and go over rules. By making your position clear early on, you will set the tone for a professional working relationship.

4 CHECK REFERENCES

No matter your past history with the job candidate, it's important to ask for references. "It's always good to find out how they did in their previous jobs or how well they participated

in school," says Rieck. "If somebody's not been very good at keeping commitments, they're not going to do it for you, either."


Teens applying to work in your store may not have much job experience, so try talking to a teacher or family friend about them. With adults, human resource departments will often only verify dates of employment; personal references can give more details about applicants. "You should ask the same questions you would ask the candidate, such as 'What do you think Susie's strengths are? Does she have any weaknesses?'" says Doreen Burdalski, a 20-year veteran of the retail industry and chair of the fashion program at Albright College in Reading, PA. "Because they know her personally, they can answer more questions about their feelings toward her and her character."

5 HIRE A GAMUT

Dancers are a natural choice for your store's staff because they understand how a leotard should fit, know the differences between ballet slippers and can relate to other dancers. But come *Nutcracker* or competition season, those dancers can easily become consumed with rehearsals and costume fittings, leaving you with a scheduling disaster. That's why some retailers like to round out their staff with a few nondancers who have more flexible schedules.

If you decide to stick with an all dance staff, take Kosty's advice and hire girls from different schools and studios to avoid scheduling conflicts. "The proms and performances are usually held on different nights," she says. This tactic works 9 times out of 10 for Kosty, and when it fails, she and her managers fill in.

Think about what traits a hire might bring to complement the staff you already have. Kosty finds it helpful to employ a competitive skater, for instance. "We're 90 percent dance, but we do sell some skate wear, so it's been great for the store to have someone with that experience," says Kosty.

For most retailers, though, the number one priority will be dependability. Whether you're hiring high school students who dance, dance moms or nondancers, you'll save yourself time and frustration by making sure that they are able to commit to the hours you need. As Burdalski puts it, "Product knowledge can be taught; availability can't be forced." 

Susan Johnston is a Boston-based freelance writer who covers business and lifestyle topics.

Junior Full Page

7 1/2" x 10"