

## FRONT DESK TRAINING STRATEGIES



By Kate Hahn

If your personal trainer told you to do 100 crunches a day, but didn't explain how the exercise would pay off in the end, you probably wouldn't stick with the routine very long. That's exactly the reaction of fledgling front deskers when you don't share the purpose behind what you're teaching. "You can't just tell a newbie to smile at every customer," says **KITTY VICTOR** of **KRS CONSULTING**, a company that helps salons grow and develop personnel. "They have to understand why it's important. Training should make them feel like they're a part of the salon, and let them know they will be rewarded for doing a good job." Here's how to create a training regimen with a purpose, and turn green support staff into Incredible Hulks.

### Warm Up

First, don't strain yourself or a potential hire by choosing someone who isn't right for the job. "As part of the interview, have the candidate come in and shadow the receptionist for four hours," says Victor. She's seen people who thought they'd love the position, try it - and then bail after 45 minutes. When you find someone who can hang, offer her the right compensation. "If you pay \$7 an hour, you get a different employee than if you offer \$15," says **BRYAN DUROCHER** author of *Front Line Service Mastery*, and a salon and business coach. "If you train them properly, they will make you money." To attract top performers, Durocher suggests creating an incentive program for front desk staff. "This prevents the job from being perceived as dead-end," he says. Offer cash rewards based on sales numbers in four key areas: retail, pre-booking, referral cards, and gift certificates. Once a potential wunderkind fills out a W-4, Victor has her spend part of her first morning at the salon listening to a 45-minute CD called *The Purpose*. It reviews the important role of the receptionist in retaining and increasing business. Giving your trainee a sense she is valued and can create workplace goals is the first step towards getting her pumped up about performance.

### Memory Jog

Next, have your new hire take a lap or two around the salon, so she gets to know each and every stylist and technician. To ease this process, Victor supplies a questionnaire called the "Personal Profile," one of the many tools available in her *Summit Salon Front Desk Operations Manual*. It asks things like, "What got you interested in the beauty business?" "What excites you?" and "How can I best serve you?" There are 15 questions in all, which also cover topics like travel and family. Completing them ensures that a receptionist makes smart choices, like matching a colorist who loves correction work with a walk-in who looks like she had an accident with the bleach bottle.

"Getting to know the staff will help her earn rewards later," says Durocher. For example, a newbie may discover that a stylist adores a particular line of retail products, uses them on all her clients, but hates to sell. When that stylist's client checks out, it's an opportunity to suggest she take home a sample of that gel or mousse - planting a seed for a future sale and retail performance



Kitty Victor





reward. Victor also suggests fortifying the front desk line-up with new stylists who have not yet built a large enough clientele to stay busy at the chair. "They get to know all their co-workers, and how the system works," says Victor. "But a huge benefit for them is they book new business for themselves." Now that's a bonus.

### **Circuit Training**

At the gym, machines help build muscles. Transform trainees into salon Schwarzeneggers by giving step-by-step instructions in computers, cash registers, phones, and other contraptions. After they've mastered easy tasks like pressing the hold button or keying in appointments, add some extra weight. For example, Durocher suggests using the phone and computer to "power book:" fill the least-busy slots first, schedule appointments close together, and offer alternative services when the one a client wants is not available. "This will help them earn rewards right away," he says.

But will the rest of your front desk staff resent someone who needs to wear a lumbar support belt just to carry her bonuses to the car? "You don't want them to compete with each other," says Durocher. "You want to build a team." To avoid WWF moments, Durocher recommends compensating the entire front desk as a group. That way, on an employee's first day her co-workers will clamor to show her the salon's procedures for tracking how much she has sold. Whether on computer or clipboard, this tangible evi-

dence of future rewards will have her itching to clear out that back stock of conditioner, or book the new Fiji Fantasy spa package.

### **Social Climbing Wall**

So your new employee performs her tasks like an old hand, and is eager to sell gift cards or pre-book 80% of your guests. But the only way to guarantee that she will be truly productive - and get the compensation that goes with it - is to help her get to know your clients. Victor uses her *Guest Procedure Chart* as a starting point. It reviews greetings, departures and confirmation calls for both new and returning guests. Simple things like giving a new client a tour or acquiring her personal information for the computer can result in sales of add-on services.

You also have to prepare your trainees for not-so-perfect moments, like the client who gets mad when her Pomeranian isn't allowed to sit on her lap during a service. "The best training for tough situations is role-playing," says Durocher, who has written many scripts focusing on issues like finding solutions for indecisive or angry clients (plus low-drama scenarios such as pre-booking and referrals). Another effective technique is to read about different real-life salon situations, such as the 20 described in Victor's manual, and then talk about how to handle them. Expect an employee to get a real understanding of your clients after about 90 days on the job.

### **Stretch It**

No matter how long you've been doing your workout routine, stretching never loses its importance. Always work on increasing your front desk employees' range of motion. "Make sure they are always increasing product knowledge," says Durocher. Have them attend product knowledge sessions along with the rest of the staff, and their retail sales will soar. Victor recommends helping them fine-tune their communication skills by using "words that work" - replacements for less effective phrases. This might mean substituting the more service-oriented "It's my pleasure" for the standard "You're welcome," or making it a habit to answer with a crisp "yes" rather than a vague "yeah."

But even the best training regimens can be ignored as time goes by. So take action to prevent any slacking off. "After the initial training, support staff should meet with their coordinator and go over their goals and objectives every two weeks," says Durocher. In these get-togethers, trainers should ask where things are going well, and in what area employees face problems or challenges. "It nips problems in the bud, and keeps information fresh," says Durocher. Keep records of these reviews, and you can use them to help determine how generous to be when deciding on one of the biggest rewards of all - a raise. If you'd like more detailed advice on establishing a front desk training program, look .