



Where It Counts the Most

Al E. Bavry, President Emeritus, Kimal Lumber

Here's a debate to mull over, when the issue of people versus machines (or simply less people) is discussed during your management meetings. When the cost-cutting tends to revolve around the number of employees you have, how do you know just how efficient to go?

I'd like to share an example of what I mean. I'm a proponent of The Underdog, which is why I've always tried to give struggling Winn Dixie some business. About four years ago, they had spent mega bucks renovating their Fruitville store in Sarasota into a real model for the future. Their fresh produce was better displayed, and a deli with hot take-out food was improved to a top-notch level. They'd remodeled using wider aisles, added a good wine selection...and much more. When I went in there for the first time, and began to walk around, all I could say was Wow! So, pushing my cart around (*that* was even good...no square wheels!!) I gathered a few things and finally made it to "check-out." Being about four in the afternoon, I'd expected the store to be kinda busy. Sadly, it wasn't, but the handful of customers lining up to check out (me being one of them) were faced with two harried cashiers...So, checking out was slow...No fault of the two heroes at the register! This was not an anomaly: I've been back a number of times—a glutton for punishment maybe? It seems that while Winn Dixie spent all this money "in the store" to make it look friendly and attractive, nevertheless that last element...that *human contact*... was sadly missing and still is. Oh, and they're beginning to add "Self Check-out" which I loathe.

Also, here's a quick snapshot of the archrival...Publix. A Publix store on Bee Ridge Road recently upgraded. But they maintain their eight or ten "regular" check-out lines...And three lines for express ten items or less. But it gets even better...At their newly minted "Service Desk" were four registers, with (gasp) four service/cashier types there. Incidentally, that "Service Desk" also provides for the customer that runs in, grabs one or two items, and can check out at "service." Now, from a "Bean Counter's" perspective...If one walked in cold and saw (gasp) all these folks manning Regular check out, Express, and Service, they'd quickly calculate...that model is way too expensive and can never work and make money. Of course, the dirty little secret is all those food supermarkets live and die on super-thin single digit profit margins. Publix's "secret," which is hiding right there in plain view is simple: Lots and lots of volume, handled in a super-efficient way...Again (gasp), with a whole bunch of "People." And to beat this scenario to death just a little more, with a hypothetical question...Would you rather shop where you have to endure the wait, with only two cashiers struggling to check you out, or would you prefer the competition's model where at that peak time has a total of fourteen or more "People" handling that volume? Very efficiently, I'd add.

So, the reason for this whole snapshot of "poorly run" to "well run"....As we wind up our year in our industry...How much praise and thanks do we pass on to that myriad of folks, who working all together, "Make It Happen"? Each and every day! I think, although the *human element* seems to be pushed more to the background, it is *still the most important element* in grading "Success...or Failure." It's real food for thought as we "Brave" into 2020 and try to figure out the best formula for making it work well, and wind up on the black side of the ledger...

Happy and Blessed Holidays...And good, successful selling for the year ahead.