

Does Your Checkout Counter Measure Up?

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The checkout counter is the last point of interaction with customers before they walk out of your store. Does yours invite them back?

Remember that customers compare experiences – and they don't just compare shoe store experiences to other shoe store experiences. Whether you know it or not, you're already in competition with Amazon and the new Amazon Go, where customers are allowed to walk in, pick up products, and walk out without "checking out." These stores use technology to record each customer's purchase, then automatically complete payment via an app, before the customer walks out the door.

If this becomes commonplace, stores may need simple "service counters" instead of "checkout" ones. But since we aren't quite there yet, it's sensible to make sure your transaction counter serves as more than "just" a transaction counter. With a little attention, it can give customers such a pleasant experience that a return visit will seem like an entertaining activity.

That means your counter needs to leave a lasting impression, which can only happen if it is **both** highly functional, for your customers *and* your employees, **and** visually appealing. Here are three short checklists to help you determine if your transaction counter is making the ultimate positive impact.

Kesslers Diamonds transaction counter. All counters shown with this article were designed by Retailworks, Inc.

Function First, for Employees

A checkout counter and the space around it should be highly functional. The more functional your transaction counter, the more your employees will deliver a friendly, effective customer service experience.

> Keep in mind that some stores might have both a transaction counter (where customers pay) and a service counter (where customers can ask questions, make returns, get information). In smaller stores, the transaction counter may need to be equipped to serve both of these purposes. What are **all** the tasks performed at your checkout counter? They could include: processing transactions (purchases and returns), wrapping gifts, providing information to customers, shipping & receiving, answering calls, doing office/paper work. It might be worthwhile during a staff meeting to ask your employees what customers expect of them during checkout – employees might need guidance on certain procedures, or have

suggestions on making checkout more efficient and easy.

> Follow basic rules of ergonomics, i.e., place frequently used items in easily-accessible places, provide an adjustable desk for employees to give them the option of standing or sitting when doing a lot of paperwork, provide good lighting and anti-fatigue mats.

> Power and phone lines should not pose a safety hazard. Be sure they are well organized and kept out of the way.

> How many employees need to work together behind the counter at the same time? There should be enough behind-the-counter space for employees to complete tasks without bumping into each other.

> Employees should never turn their backs to customers or walk away with a credit card. Avoid placing items that employees need during a transaction behind them or out of a customer's sight.

> If you offer giftwrap (bonus points!), make



Photos courtesy of Retailworks, Inc.

Right: Stein's Garden & Home store service counter. Below: counter at Olive Fine Organic Living.

sure there is an easy organizational system for tissue, bows/ribbons, wrapping paper, bags and boxes.

Function First, for Customers

Your transaction counter should provide a streamlined experience for customers as well. A confusing or slow checkout line could deter consumers from finishing their purchase or from buying again in the future. Customers at your checkout counter have made the decision to purchase your product, so make their decision as rewarding, convenient and pleasing for them as possible.

> Consider how shoppers approach the counter and line up. Do they know where to stand?

> What entertains customers while they're waiting in line?

You will be more successful if you can find a way to keep consumers engaged with your brand during this time instead of staring at their phones.

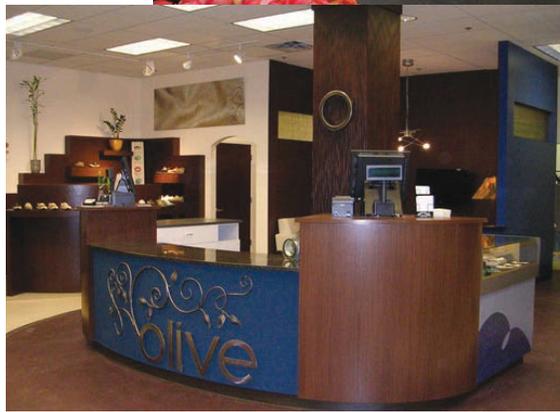
> Feel free to display impulse buys near the register. Just remember to present them in uncluttered, well-designed display stands/containers.

> Use clear signage to explain your return policy.

> Do you offer gift cards? If so, promote them by placing a few on display.

> Do you want constructive feedback? Today's consumers love the idea that their opinion is wanted. Offer a Suggestions Box – and place small cards, pen and box on counter for customers to tell you what they think.

> Provide business cards and promotional brochures for customers to take, or put them in the box or bag with their purchase.



Design Matters

Once you've ensured that your checkout counter is fully functional, you can turn your attention to its design. Most transaction counters serve as a focal point in the room, so be sure that it stands out and makes a positive statement.

> The design of the checkout counter should match the style and personality of the rest of the store.

> Make the best lasting impression by branding your transaction counter. Which colors, finishes and textures will leave customers with a memorable experience of your brand?

> Proudly display your logo above your checkout counter or on it. This will increase brand recognition, and also help customers who still want to pay by check.

> Make use of the valuable wall space behind

your transaction counter. Not only is this a great place for your logo, but it's also ideal for impactful displays and/or info-graphics. Change the display every few weeks. You can use simple tools like posters or photos (some retailers invite customers to post photos of themselves wearing or using products), signs about upcoming events (yours or your community's), or messages: Valentine's Day Will Be Here Soon; Mother's Day Is Coming; Does Someone You Love Need Prom Shoes?

> Audit and update your checkout counter design every few years. It will help you in two ways: first, in keeping your store fresh and second, in enabling you to engage with changing shopper habits or transaction functions. Can you add a new "skin" or finish to the counter-front? What about installing a new countertop? Changing the pendant lights above a counter can also give the area an updated look.

If Amazon Go is wildly successful, it's possible that it and future new technologies may eliminate the role of checkout counters altogether. But for now, your transaction counter is a perfect place to say "Come back soon – we always look forward to seeing you."

If your store's transaction counter meets the criteria on these three short lists, then congratulations: You've created a checkout space that is meeting the needs of both your employees and your

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customers. If it doesn't yet, a few small changes can transform the experience, impressing shoppers and leaving them walking away with a positive, memo-

orable impression of your brand...something that will have them coming back in no time.

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