

MP3-based program trains Casual Male associates on the sales floor

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By Len Lewis

To boost its training efforts, Casual Male decided to outfit its employees with headphones.

"It's somewhat unique in that we use audio MP3 players to distribute the training content," says executive vice president and COO Dennis R. Hernreich. "Basically, our people in the stores put on a headset and learn as they listen."

"It's active, fun learning," says Judy L'Heureux, the company's vice president of sales. "People are not just standing still. They are participating in the learning and it becomes a tactile experience. It enables them to multi-task and we found that audio can result in great retention rates."



The program, called InfoTrain Outsource and developed specifically for the retail industry by Total Sound InfoTainment (TSI) of Teaneck, N.J., combines auditory, visual, tactile and kinesthetic training into one method. It has become a valuable alternative to the development of expensive — and sometimes inefficient and insufficient — conventional training programs for the apparel retailer, which operates nearly 500 stores nationwide under the Casual Male and Rochester Clothing banners.

The newly expanded training curriculum comes at a time when Casual Male is focused on merchandising for men who are not as large as its traditional core customer demographic.

The \$6 billion big-and-tall market "really starts at waist 42," Hernreich says. "We do extremely well with guys whose waist sizes are 48 and higher but, historically, we've not really done as well with the smaller end of the market. We are now trying to broaden our reach with the smaller and tall guys. It's not so much a change in strategy as it is a change in marketing approach."

Part of that approach, and one which will benefit the chain's entire customer base, is enhanced training for all its 3,000 retail sales associates, a move that will help reduce employee turnover and offer the staff the opportunity to learn more about the merchandise in an entertaining way.

"What distinguishes us from other retailers is that many of our sales associates connect with us emotionally," Hernreich says. "They have family or friends who come from the world of big and tall. Now, we are trying to give our associates more guidance and training on how to treat all customers."

Training was an in-house function until early last year, but the department lacked structure and the amount of time and labor it took to put together programs was excessive.



"We just weren't good at it," Hernreich admits. "The programs were relatively old and didn't hit the mark in terms of the type of [product] knowledge needed by sales associates. We weren't giving them the guidance they needed to be experts. We knew we either had to build a new department or use an outsourced solution."

Revamping the in-house program would have meant hiring staff to develop new techniques, documenting the results and distributing a complete program to the stores. "It was a lot to tackle and it simply wasn't feasible," L'Heureux says. "We needed something with immediate impact."

TSI "seemed unique and demonstrated their expertise in this area," Hernreich says. "They came to us

with a packaged solution, but then customized everything for us.”

TSI performed a full assessment to determine Casual Male’s training needs. Shortly thereafter, a three-year training plan was put in place. TSI’s InfoTrain Outsource team began developing and producing custom training modules, many of which utilize TSI’s LTraining methodology. Developed specifically for the retail industry, LTraining allows trainees to “learn by doing” and, in most instances, involves the use of headsets.



Start with merchandise info

The first programs are related to the merchandise. “As you can imagine, our merchandise is unique and its features and benefits are very important to our guests,” L’Heureux says. “As such, the ability to speak in an educated manner is crucial to sales.” Training also focuses on how to size clients properly at both Casual Male and Rochester stores, as well as “instruction on how to sell key seasonal items.”

Employees use headsets and MP3 players to listen to the training sessions, which run from 20 to 35 minutes in length. As they listen, “they are looking at the merchandise or demonstrating what they are listening to,” Hernreich says. “We tested the system for about six months [last year] and found it was a very effective form of delivery.” All Casual Male and Rochester stores are now equipped with the players.

“LTraining by means of a headset device enables us to put trainees on the sales floor in front of what they need to learn about,” says TSI founder and CEO Art Suriano. “We use the term ‘InfoTaining’ since there are sound effects, dialog and music to keep them engaged in what they need to learn.”

Retail staffs “are lean these days, and the goal here is to keep associates on the sales floor as much as possible,” Suriano says. “They can stop the training when the store gets busy and start up again when it gets quiet.”

L’Heureux and her sales team are in the midst of developing three years worth of content — everything from programs for newly hired sales associates to more detailed programs for working with the store’s clientele.

Training schedules vary

Casual Male has about 500 MP3 players available to employees, and the frequency of usage varies. “We have blackout dates depending on traffic,” L’Heureux says. “For example, we leave the stores alone at Father’s Day and other holidays. Other than that, associates have at least one module per month and we usually give them three or four weeks to complete the training.”

Through outsourcing, TSI is able to produce custom training modules quickly and maintain the flow of new modules to the stores at a steady pace. Since InfoTrain Outsource, an extension of TSI, is a self-contained service, clients simply pay a monthly retainer with everything included. TSI offers other training methods, as well, but the recordings and accompanying documents seem to be hitting the mark for Casual Male.

According to Hernreich, “The green pasture here is getting our sales associates more in tune with how to treat our guys and how to wardrobe them. We haven’t made investments in this area before, but progress is being made in steps and we have a big appetite to fill in terms of moving the sales culture ahead in our stores.”