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How to Become a Destination Cheese Shop

Location May be Key but Customer Service Will Keep Them Coming Back

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[-By James Mellgren](#)

Ask any savvy retailer what are the three keys to a successful store and they will likely tell you the following three things: location, location, and location. Although there is a lot of truth to that old joke especially if you run a coffee shop it has always seemed to me that location only goes so far. In other words, location may get them in the door the first time, but how do you keep them coming back? And supposing you don't have an ideal location, then what? How do you make your cheese shop (or cheese department within a bigger store) a destination for cheese shoppers? Since most stores across the country depend on shoppers driving some distance to reach you, and usually passing one or two other stores along the way, how do you make certain that they pass up those others and arrive at your store? The answers are simple: convenience, quality, selection, product knowledge and overall cleanliness all things you should be focusing on anyway throughout the store. So the next time anyone asks you the secret to a successful store, tell them, "Customer service, customer service, and customer service."

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Once again, the elements that can help make your store or cheese department a destination are convenience, quality, selection, staff knowledge, customer service, and cleanliness. Price, although often touted as a draw for some retailers, is really not as much of an issue for higher-end stores. If your competition is a big box store or a Trader Joe's, then chances are you'll never win a price war so why bother. Instead, you must compete on the basis of being a superior place to shop for fine foods and kitchenware because your store is more convenient, has a better selection, and above all, has a reputation for superior customer service. However, if the nearest competitor is another cheese shop or gourmet retailer, then price might come into play, but more likely it will be convenience, selection, or some other facet of customer service that will win the day. The following is a look at some of the areas in which you can excel to beat the competition and make your cheese business a destination for serious cheese shoppers.

Convenience

Convenience can mean different things to different people. If you have a bad, inconvenient location, there isn't much you can do about it except find a new one. More importantly, however, is how convenient your store or cheese department is to shop in. Can a customer get in and out quickly when they are making a quick purchase, or are they going to get bogged down at poorly staffed service counters or in long check-out lines? In order to avoid time delays at the cheese counter, consider a combination of full- and self-service cases so the person who simply wants a slab of generic cheddar or a disc of fresh goat cheese can grab and go. For those who wish to taste and make a thoughtful selection, a short wait in line isn't going to bother them as much. Just make sure they don't languish in line while

waiting for a salesperson. When the line gets long especially during the holiday season have someone offer samples for tasting to those in line, or arrange to have vendors come in to do demos next to where the line forms so people can taste freely. Above all, make sure your signage is interesting, up-to-date, informative and perhaps even a little entertaining so that shoppers can read while waiting and maybe have their mind made up by the time they are served. These "silent salespeople" can also answer a lot of questions while someone is waiting.

Selection and Quality

These two go hand in hand because you can have the most interesting cheeses available but if you don't care for them properly it won't matter. As to selection, don't confuse quantity with a good selection of cheeses. Unless you have the space, the staff and the customer base, there is no need to carry 300 varieties of cheese. It's far more important to have a thoughtful selection of cheeses that are offered at their peak of ripeness than to have a dozen brands of brie, half of which are wilting and flavorless. I've seen cheese cases with 50 varieties that were infinitely more exciting than a store boasting 350 cheeses from around the world because the staff understood those 50 cheeses and took good care of them. Harking back to convenience, some of the more mundane, everyday cheeses can easily be pre-cut and wrapped for the self-serve case.

As for quality, we won't go into all the intricacies of caring for cheese, but there are a few basic rules that should always be considered. For example, don't over-order cheese, particularly slow sellers. It's better to run out of a cheese than to try and sell one that is well past its prime or has been damaged somehow. Make sure to face-cut cheeses (slicing off the dried-out end of the wheel before offering a taste), and scrape off any moldy or slimy bits. Except for the peak holiday season, try to keep cheese storage in the back to a minimum. Buy frequently enough so that your cheese case remains fresh and the turnover high. Establishing a reputation for high-quality cheeses may be the most important thing you can do in steering traffic to your store.

Staff Knowledge

Knowledgeable, helpful and engaging salespeople are your greatest asset. Nurture them and treat them well in order to keep them. Be sure to maintain a library of cheese books such as *Steven Jenkins' Cheese Primer* (Workman), *The Murray's Cheese Handbook* (Broadway) by Rob Kaufelt, *Cheese* (Potter) by Max McCalman, or *The Cheese Lover's Cookbook & Guide* (Simon & Schuster) by Paula Lambert, to name a few, and encourage your staff to read them. Make it fun by holding contests with cheese quizzes that result in prizes or special discounts. Hold regular meetings that coincide with cheese deliveries to taste and discuss the new varieties. Keep signage current and as informative as possible. Use your signs to romance the cheese, relate stories about the cheesemakers and offer serving suggestions, all of which can benefit your staff as much as the consumers. Above all, make certain that the staff reads all the informative signage that you've poured so much time and effort into. Next to high quality, a knowledgeable and helpful staff will help keep your store a primary cheese destination for your shoppers.

Cleanliness and Food Safety

This one may seem obvious but overall cleanliness and adherence to food safety practices are crucial to becoming a destination location. No one wants to shop in a store they perceive as dirty. Clean out the inside of the cases routinely, at least once a week or so depending on the amount of traffic you have. Make sure everything sparkles, including staff aprons, cheese-cutting implements, countertops and the glass fronts of the cases. The nature of the cheese department is one of turnover because it is perishable merchandise. Nevertheless, I've seen cheese counters with displays that look like they've been there since Nixon was president. Replace sun-faded posters, cracked or discolored serving bowls and platters, and other time-worn display fixtures. Regularly replace signage that gets stained, torn or, worse yet, outdated. Your actual food areas may be spotless, but if non-perishable display pieces are dirty or

broken, it doesn't instill confidence in shoppers. Perceived cleanliness is as important as actual cleanliness.

Customer Service

This last category actually encompasses all of the above, for what is customer service if not the desire to make the shopping experience as positive as possible for the consumer? Good customer service is one aspect of becoming a destination store that you can't show from the outside; you have to prove it by your actions everyday. However, once you establish a reputation for good customer service, it will be a factor for many people in determining where to shop for cheese. Customer service is all about making the customer feel welcome, comfortable and able to shop with ease throughout the store, not just in the cheese department. As the population ages, consider whether or not your signage is clear and legible for someone with failing eyesight. Make sure the lighting is of a level that is conducive to shopping, both inside the cases and out. Have a system in place to deal with long lines at the holidays. Don't allow customers to languish in a queue when you're busy. As soon as the line gets to be more than two or three people, try to offer samples even while you are helping someone else. As you offer a taste to the person in the front of the line, offer tastes to those behind as well. As noted above, make your signage compelling and informative. Many people will answer their own questions before they reach the front of the line from reading your cheese signs. Use other signage outside of the case to advertise specials, promote your party platters or catering, or to impart some historical, technical or whimsical aspect of cheese. Use trivia questions that change regularly to entertain those waiting. Again, this is particularly important at holiday time when lines are long everywhere. Give out small prizes or discounts to anyone who can correctly answer your trivia questions. If your customers go away with a positive experience even though they stood in a long line waiting to be served, they will carry that feeling with them for a long time, remembering your store as a fun place to shop.

It's important to remember that none of these things quality, staff knowledge, customer service or cleanliness are ever done. You would be well advised to routinely go about the shop or the cheese department and make check-off lists of the things that could be improved or have slipped since the last time you checked. All your good work can be for naught if your customers are disappointed when they come to your store. Strive to create a warm, inviting atmosphere in which to shop, with clean, orderly shopping areas, efficient lines, innovative and engaging displays, and good customer service and you will establish the store or your department within a store as a destination everyone will want to come to.

Checklist for Becoming a Destination Cheese Shop

Does the store appear inviting from the outside? Is it clear that you are in the cheese business? Are the window displays up-to-date and engaging? What century are you in? Has the store kept up with the times? Are your display fixtures suitable for display? Are they broken, dusty, sun-faded or otherwise discolored, stained, or damaged? Does the cheese inside the case look like it's attended to? Are the wrappings tight and neat? Are the signs inside the case current, legible and informative? Is there an overall sense of cleanliness and order in the store? Is the sales staff neat, clean and well-attired? Do you have systems in place to deal with long lines, special orders, customer returns and other challenges? Most important of all, do you have efficient systems in place for the timely receiving of the cheese, rotation of the product and the general care and maintenance of the case and the cheeses?

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