

The Fast Track Road Map

By Rich Kizer and Georganne Bender



The past 45 days have been a whirlwind for us. Our calendar tells us that we've been in nine different states, shopped at 37 different strip centers and malls, and visited over 200 stores. We estimate we've walked at least 50 miles of stores and have spoken with over 1000 customers and store associates. You'd think we'd be exhausted. Maybe we're weird, but we live for this stuff!

We try and take a daily "Dose of Reality" away from our life on the road; realities we know have made us better people. We've learned so much from retailers who just seem to have it all together. Their stores hum along, their store associates are happy, and they actually enjoy a life outside of the store. These Fast Track Retailers (FTRs) all share common traits:

Common Trait # 1: **Let Your Lions Roar!**

Are your store associates all reading from the same page in the same book that you are reading from? Each associate brings a unique talent to your store but you have to let them use it. FTRs have a knack of getting their associates hyper-involved in store operations. We've seen hundreds of great "associate ownership" examples where store programs, operations, promotions, merchandising and more have been turned over to associates. When looked upon as more than a body who can fog a mirror or ring a register, these associates have demonstrated an ability to perform tasks, introduce profit-producing ideas, and encourage

others to work with customers in ways that would make any retailer proud.

You know why this works? Letting your lions – your associates – roar works because they know that their FTRs believe enough in them to let them try. If they fail, they talk about what could have been done differently and then they move on. A trust, no, a sense of ownership overtakes the associate and they continually strive to do more for the store.

Common Trait # 2: **Seeing the BIG Picture**

FTRs always keep one eye on the BIG picture – long range goals for their stores. They have short term goals as well, but they understand that to keep the future bright, they have to make future plans. Part of this planning involves keeping track of retail trends, keeping notebooks of things they'd like to do, floor moves they'd like to make, lines they'd like to sell, etc. When a vendor visits an FTR's store, they spend quality time with the vendor, taking full advantage of the vendors knowledge.

If you don't have time to set goals or work on the big picture, please re-read item # 1. When you turn over some of the day-to-day tasks to your associates, you'll find extra time in your day. Don't be afraid to delegate!

One of the FTRs shared an old African proverb with us that asks the question: "How do you eat an elephant? One bite at a time." The same goes for the goals you set. FTRs accomplish their goals by breaking them down into smaller, more manageable, easy-to-do steps. They plan their

work, then work their plan.

Common Trait # 3: **Know Thy Competition**

To quote the Godfather, from the movie of the same name, "Keep your friends close, but keep your enemies closer". Yes, the retailers you see at the Chamber of Commerce meetings are competition, even if they sell product that's different from yours. If they take customers money, they are competition.

FTRs are not afraid to visit their competitors, in fact many of them actually enjoy it. They walk the competitors' sales floors, grab carts and shop the aisles. They check out everything from the parking lot to the back door and every square inch in-between, including the rest rooms. They talk with customers, they buy and return merchandise. Some of them even attend in-store events and classes. FTRs spend time on their competitors' websites, going so far as to sign up to receive their e-newsletters and alerts.

FTRs also assign associates competitors stores to visit. They know that the people who work on the front lines with customers will see things they themselves will miss. Whatever an associate uncovers is studied and discussed at store meetings.

But here's the important part: FTRs know that there's absolutely no point in shopping a competitor's store if you do nothing with what's uncovered. So whenever anyone, associate or FTR, finds a great idea, it's tweaked until it works in their own store.

Common Trait # 4: **Establish Teams of Outlaws**

FTRs all have groups of selected store associates (we call them Teams of Outlaws) that have been charged with finding better ways of doing things for customers and for the store. The associates on the Outlaw teams may change from one task to another, but one thing never changes: the Outlaws always have permission to break – or re-make – the rules in order to accomplish their assigned task.

Of course, the FTRs meet with their Outlaws first to establish goals and set guidelines, but the rest is up to the Outlaws. Team spirit thrives! And when each mission

is accomplished, its ins and outs and how it will be implemented is discussed at a store meeting. Then the fun begins! One FTR invited us to an Outlaw celebration. Each Outlaw's contribution was acknowledged, then the Team of Outlaws shared stories and bragged about one another. We could see the other associates were eager to be chosen for the next Outlaw team. And the FTR just sat back in her chair, sipping her coffee, with a huge smile on her face.

You may be one of the Fast Track Retailers we've had the pleasure to meet in our travels. Or perhaps you've just decided to become one yourself. Either way, you now have a FTR fast track road map that will help make your store a little stronger and your life a little easier!

Rich Kizer & Georganne Bender are retail anthropologists. They stalk and study that most elusive of mammals – the retailer. They are nationally recognized experts on customer diversity, “messing with the media”, marketing & promotion, and everything retail. In 2004 they were named two of the Retail Industry's Most Influential People. Kizer & Bender have been featured on ABC National News; their client list reads like a Who's Who in American business, and their book, “Champagne Strategies on a Beer Budget!” has helped thousands of retailers improve their bottom line.