

from **UPSKILLING**
to **UPSELLING**



Training programs for retailers and installers have become a high priority for suppliers of shutters as they combat the consumer perception that there is little difference between products on the market.
Dawn Adams reports.

THE BIGGEST CHALLENGE for businesses selling shutters is that consumers are increasingly viewing this category as generic. Without an understanding of why prices for end products can vary significantly, they have little information to make a decision about which shutter is most appropriate for their purpose.

As a result, product knowledge is seen as critical by suppliers keen to combat a perception that shutters are a generic window covering with little differentiation between them. They are acting on this concern by introducing training programs for retail sales staff and installers to ensure the merits of each product offered are better known, so that they can attract consumer attention and command the price point they seek.

However, building knowledge at the retail level is not enough to change or influence consumer buying patterns. Armed with the facts, retailers and their staff are being encouraged to pass on that information to end consumers to influence their choices. If they can be upsold to a more advanced option, the outcome could also mean a higher margin and a more profitable business for retailers.

But suppliers are not only focusing on training to assist retailers. Some are inviting questions from people quoting in the field to help them secure a sale while they are still on site and when they still have the customer's attention, others are introducing online ordering or more efficient electronic quoting mechanisms to enhance and speed up the supply chain. And yet others speak often of cash flow with a deep understanding of its essential element in any successful business.

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Decor Blinds names cash flow as a priority

Achieving a strong cash flow is a key reason to choose Thermalite shutters, according to Decor Blinds managing director Frank Cairns. "We promote the fact that Thermalite shutters are Australian made and we have a guaranteed three-week delivery," he says. In contrast, he claims shutters imported from China could take eight to 10 weeks before they are delivered.

"YOU GET YOUR money in 10 weeks with imported shutters from China or in three weeks from us; that's cash flow," he says. "Companies can't survive without cash flow." Like importers, Decor Blinds also requires a deposit when an order is placed but Cairns insists the fact that final payments are made faster assists retailers.

"There are other issues that make Australian made attractive," he says. "A lady ordered 10 shutters from us a while ago and we only made seven and were asked where the other three were when we delivered." Acknowledging an error had been made, Cairns had the remaining three shutters manufactured at the firm's premises in just 48 hours ensuring the customer remained satisfied.

"If that same error had happened with a Chinese shutter, it would take another eight weeks to make the additional ones required," he says. Cairns is also convinced a lot of customers are now requesting Australian made. "The price is very competitive and we have a 25-year warranty," he says.

Campaigns drive consumer leads for Luxaflex

There is a long-standing marketing campaign for Luxaflex Basswood and Polyresin Shutters which is specifically designed to drive leads from consumers to wholesale dealers.

Jenny Brown, marketing manager of Luxaflex parent division, Australian Window Furnishings, outlines how the marketing team uses

its network of specialist media buyers, creative and public relations agencies to plan and deliver the campaigns. Suggesting they would be unaffordable for individual dealers to fund, she highlights how the power of the group is used to work cooperatively to gain greater exposure through their consumer advertising.

Vogue Shutters dealers have also participated in consumer lead generation advertising for a number of years.

"We have run a series of additional discount promotions to selected wholesale dealers to support the front end consumer discount on offer to drive leads," she says. "This allows Australian Window Furnishings to assist the wholesaler and share the burden of reduced gross profits due to discounting the product to the consumer."

Brown stresses the firm supports Australian manufacturing, pointing to its marketing efforts for products made in its factory such as the

Polyresin Shutters produced in Brisbane.

"There is no reason for this category to not continue to perform strongly this year," she says. And she highlights how strong competition from cheap Chinese imports and the strong American dollar have dragged down prices. "Consumers have ultimately been the winners as the product is now more affordable than ever before," she says.

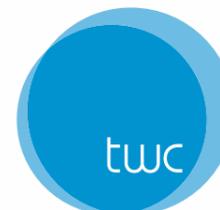


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Open Shutters

Open Shutters focuses on building trust

Training sessions to ensure retail staff are kept up to date are being offered by Open Shutters in a bid to build knowledge about its products.

"I get calls from people when they're on site and they might say the customer wants to know if we can do this or that," says the company's Gail Cottrill. "If the retailer doesn't have our depth of knowledge, they still have direct contact with us. And if I don't know if something can be done, I can ask their question to the joiners and cabinet makers in our factory."

Cottrill is also convinced securing sales and building a client base is 'all about trust'. "The hardest thing for us all is to work on is building trust," she says. "That trust factor is the strongest thing we all have to trade on at the moment." She suggests trust becomes even more critical in a market where consumers often don't recognise the differences between products and instead, view shutters as generic goods with little that differentiates their quality.

"I don't think consumer choices are coming down to the detail of a product anymore, everyone is so hammered on price," she says. Her recommendation is to conduct every transaction in an open and honest way. "This is the traditional method and it is your greatest strength and power in the long run," she says. "I think consumers want people to be honest with them. If they think 'I trust you', giving them your quote becomes just part of the formality because they believe in you."

But she recognises the current practice is more often for people to get multiple quotes and then to review them largely on the basis of price. "At the moment, people get eight or nine quotes and then think 'this one is cheaper or that's twice the price, maybe they're ripping me off'," she says.

Helping consumers to understand why one option may be more expensive than another is a critical part of educating them about the products on the market. "Many people don't know the questions to ask about what makes a product different," she says. "Consumers don't necessarily understand the reason for a price difference, that it might not just be because a person wants to make more money. It's all about educating the consumer about the choices, how products perform and their longevity. It's part of building trust, having that depth of knowledge and foundation."

The manner in which that information is delivered to consumers is also important. "Along with trust, you need to show the customer respect, that they are an intelligent individual who can make a judgement," she says. "You're not there to tell them what to have, you're there to help them make the best choice."

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Variety of assistance from Lifestyle Blinds & Shutters

Marketing material, sampling and assistance for electronic quoting are among the initiatives introduced by Lifestyle Blinds & Shutters to help retailers to secure sales of the company's range.

Paul Bush, Victorian sales manager, points to other initiatives such as providing training on product knowledge and installation and assistance in learning an online ordering system.

"We have brochures that are particular to each shutter product in our range as well as a 52-page all product brochure that covers the whole gamut that Lifestyle offers," he says. "We also have sample boxes for each product that are state of the art."

Training on product knowledge and installation is conducted on site at a customer's premises or at the firm's Queensland base, where a purpose-built portable classroom features openings that allow attendees to practice installing shutters. At the Queensland premises, attendees leave with a training and a specifications manual after a two-day course.

"We also support retailers with the lowest factory error rate in relation to imported plantation shutters, at just one third of one per cent," he says.

To reduce lead times and secure a lower price, retailers can order direct from the factory. "We don't throw them in the deep end," Bush says. "To begin, they are given a test website where they can duplicate their ordering while they continue to order from our customer service team. When the customer service team is happy with their online ordering, they can switch to using the online system."

In the field, an electronic quoting system allows users to punch in the product, its dimensions and any additional information required such as the shape of a panel or whether it's bi-fold or a sliding option. The quote is automatically generated.

Product knowledge top of mind at Intex Concepts

The main deterrent for retailers to sell shutters is product knowledge, according to Intex Concepts' Ross Parker. "The way suppliers can address that is by conducting sales and technical seminars, which we do," he says.

The firm also offers job specific assistance. "If there is a complicated job and they need assistance, they can contact us from the site or their office," he says. More challenging issues requiring this type of help might include particular shapes, spans, wind loadings or compliance with Australian standards or more complex bi-fold or sliding systems.

"This sector is growing through market awareness as the applications for shutters become more varied," Parker says. "Retailers and tradesmen are becoming more aware of their versatility and applications."

He stresses another deterrent to sales is if a product is inappropriately positioned, installed incorrectly or the wrong hardware componentry has been used.

And he suggests it is up to the marketing manager of the supply company to make sure that retailers have the appropriate product knowledge.

Parker is encouraging retailers to draw on expertise from their supplier and to recognise the real market possibilities for shutters to secure additional sales.

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