

**Whole Foods Magazine
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CAN YOU FIND GOOD EMPLOYEES?

BY JAY JACOBOWITZ

There's an old saying, "Youth is wasted on the young." As an independent natural products retailer, you probably wish you could hire someone who possesses the wisdom that comes with age, but with the back muscles of a high school wrestler. Because retail is a physical sport, you must recruit able-bodied individuals with enough energy to work the long hours, both early and late. This means you won't be able to fully staff your store using the oldest and wisest candidates, but must select from the younger, more active set, whose personalities, shall we say, are still forming.

Add to this demographic dilemma the attitude most people have that retail is not a career. A store-clerk gig, in the minds of most, is a waypoint on the path to something more intellectually engaging and financially rewarding. What can you do to overcome these two major obstacles?

BE ABOUT SOMETHING LARGER THAN YOURSELF

In its heyday, Whole Foods Market was one of the coolest places to work. The products were cutting edge, the stores were beautiful, the shoppers were trill ("true and real," a millennial update of hip). It was a place to see and be seen. In the 1990s, it was perhaps the best example of the community space described by Ray Oldenburg in his 1989 book *The Great Good Place*, as "the third place," after home and work, where people spontaneously gather and socialize.

As a result, Whole Foods didn't have to work hard to recruit highly motivated employees. Energetic, quality-oriented, smart young people naturally gravitated there to work. This is a phenomenon known as "self-selection," where people select themselves into a group of individuals with like characteristics. It really worked for Whole Foods.

THE INDEPENDENT PLAY

Although you can't be as highly visible or influential as Whole Foods, you can still make an impression in your community and help inspire the desire to work in your store. I've seen it happen in the best independents around the country. The common thread among them is a single word: integrity. The dictionary defines integrity as adhering to moral and ethical principle; being of sound moral character; honesty.

The most successful independents I know all possess integrity, but more important, they put it to use. Every day, these retailers actively model the behavior they want their employees to mirror.

- a. Empathy; listening intently to and acknowledging customers' concerns while putting aside one's own.
- b. Explaining to employees the principles behind the policies; such as, why we stand behind our products with an unconditional satisfaction guarantee.
- c. Engaging the customer with questions to gain a fuller understanding before making recommendations, including not just product, but awareness of stress triggers, the importance of rest, and of having fun.

GIVE TO GET

The other trait the best independents demonstrate is selflessness. Although how they describe this differs, each one believes that their highest purpose is not selling product, but educating and raising others up to achieve well-being. In some cases, this may mean NOT selling a product the customer may want. While they might not make the sale today, they establish something more important: trust. I've noticed another similarity in these top-quality retailers: highly engaged employees. **JJ**