

Product Information at Your Fingertips

Purchasers of extreme sports equipment visiting Broli La Source du Sport (Brolisport) in Ste. Hyacinthe, Quebec, will find that everyone's an expert. Whether a new hire or a seasoned ski and bike professional, you likely won't be able to tell the difference. That's because each Brolisport staff member has access to a new digital salesforce technology called the Dakis Humanized Expert that provides them with all the information they need to know when servicing a customer.

Brolisport is a specialized independent sports retailer that is part of the Source for Sports buying group, which has more than 175 stores across Canada. As a smaller, specialized store competing with large, big-box sporting goods chains, Brolisport's success is highly dependent on finding ways to differentiate itself. One is by offering high-end, specialized sporting goods aimed at the extreme sports enthusiast, combined with knowledgeable staff offering a high level of customer service.

This can present challenges, however, since high-end sporting goods are becoming increasingly technical in nature. Good customer service, therefore, means going well beyond a friendly meet and greet approach, to having staff that is well-versed in all the products



André Brochu, Owner of Broli La Source du Sport (left) and Patrick Gauvin, Marketing Director at Dakis, test out the Humanized Expert.

available, can clearly explain the benefits of each one, and make well-informed recommendations to customers. Having that level of knowledge, despite staff turnover, is an ongoing challenge.

According to Brolisport Co-owner and Manager Francois Fortier, it became the first retailer in the country to try out the new digitized solution that was officially launched in 2004. He says the reasons were clear: "When you have a store like ours, it's very difficult to understand all the products. There can be a thousand different products with a thousand different specifications. That can take a long time to learn."

In addition, many of the products in the store come with a high price tag. So cus-

tomers expect sales staff to know all the finer details of the equipment they are considering.

With the Humanized Expert solution, sales staff can use a handheld PDA (personal digital assistant) or in-store kiosk to answer questions and assist customers in making purchase decisions. The application is based on a customized questionnaire that is developed collaboratively with sports equipment manufacturers and sales employees. Customers can also use the kiosk to check out the information on their own. "The program gives them a quick answer when they need it," says Fortier.

Brolisport first began using the digital solution for the 2003 ski season because

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of the amount of information needed to sell the equipment. "There is so much you need to know about weight, height, equipment size or make," says Fortier. The concept proved so successful, capabilities were expanded to include bikes.

It's also used for staff training. Staff members can go through questions and look at updated product specifications when they have some spare time. "When they have a moment during the day they go to the kiosk and train themselves," says Fortier.

The store's Web site will soon be integrated with the entire system so customers have access to the same level of detailed information at their convenience.

Deploying the Humanized Expert is a relatively simple task. Philippe Hugron, President of Montreal-based Dakis, says this type of capability is beneficial for many types of small to medium-size retail outlets, because they don't have to have the in-house resources to train staff or install the equipment needed. "For those who don't have the hardware, we can deliver a turnkey product for a monthly fee — much like a cell phone plan."

Startup application fees (not including hardware) begin at approximately \$200 a month and rise depending on the extent

of the service. Any hardware add-on is an extra cost. Hugron estimates that a single kiosk costs \$3,000, with equipment rental fees of approximately \$95 a month. He adds that the application can also be integrated with some POS systems to perform inventory and pricing updates.

"The application lets sales staff do more than [compare prices]," says Hugron. "They can probe the customer's needs and recommend the right product. If you're into complicated products such as sports equipment, electronics, food and wine or home renovation for example, employees can't learn every product by heart. But they can have the information at their fingertips."

Brolisport currently uses the Humanized Expert for 50 per cent of its product line sales. Since starting to use the system, it reports overall sales in the first year increased 12 per cent, compared to the two to three

per cent industry average.

In addition, the staff is happier, because they can find answers to customers' questions and be more confident about what they are selling. "All the staff uses it and it's the greatest thing for training," says Fortier. "The customers like it too. It's definitely good for business." **CR**

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