

what next?

# RETAIL'S LITTLE HELPER

◀ By Annette Bourdeau ▶

We all know that customer service has become an increasingly important component in the marketing mix. But it's not always easy for retailers to find knowledgeable, talented, ground-level staffers.

Now there's a software system to help. Called the Humanized Expert, the latest tool from Montreal-based Dakis Decision Systems can generate customized product recommendations, encourage cross sales and provide a sound second opinion.

Intended to be set up at in-store kiosks, the software allows customers to simply type in what they're looking for (like a bike or a digital camera), then answer a series of questions about what they hope to get out of it. The software's artificial intelligence module then draws from a Dakis master database containing profiles of all the products the store carries, complete with pros and cons for each item. Dakis founder and CEO Philippe Hugron explains that displaying a product's cons can reduce return rates because it helps customers fully understand what they're getting. Also, an automated cross-selling module kicks in, recommending relevant accessories.

National buying group Foto Source, which has 187 stores including Foto Source and



Japan Camera locations across the country, is set to launch a test run of the Humanized Expert in six shops in mid-July.

Originally slated to run in just two retail locations – one in Montreal and one in Toronto – some dealers were so excited about the software they opted to install it before the test is complete.

Foto sales manager Serge Roi says the tool is a perfect fit for his stores because their high-tech products are constantly evolving, and it helps salespeople keep on top of all the new gadgets. "It's a great tool to show us as a leader in the industry," he adds.

While the Humanized Expert is currently tailored for sports retailers and electronics shops, Hugron says we can expect to see the software used in other categories as early as September. Outside of the retail realm, potential applications for the tool include travel, pharmaceutical and e-government.

Running the Humanized Expert ranges in price from \$190 to \$800 a month, depending on factors like variety of products and number of kiosks installed. Retailers can purchase kiosks directly from the firm for about \$3,000 each.

The million-dollar question is: Does it work? Early results at a Montreal Brolisport location point to yes. Since first participating as the development site of the Humanized Expert in November 2003, the sports store's revenue has increased by almost 12%, while specific products programmed into the database have seen even more growth – sales of Alpin skis were up nearly 21% over the previous season, and sales of a top bike line went up almost 30%.

The technology, first made available early this year, is Hugron's brainchild. The idea came to him in the late '90s when he noticed several emerging trends: an influx of more complicated products, a declining workforce and the dominance of big box stores like Wal-Mart. ■

## MOBISODES

It was only a matter of time before a prodco opened a mobile division.

Toronto-based Generator Productions is one of the first to take the plunge: Its mobile content division officially opened its doors last month. Known for its branded TV programming like sponsored cooking shows, the shop will take its branded content model to the tiny screen.

Its first project will be sponsored horoscopes – starting in late summer, customers can download clips of a woman reading their

daily astrological forecast. Each reading will be about 20-25 seconds long, and tagged with a "brought to you by" message. Depending on variables like segment length and number of episodes, the cost to marketers (at press time, no partners had been announced) will range from \$5,000 to \$150,000.

Barry Marcus, producer at the new division, predicts most mobile content will consist of 30-second to five-minute stand-alone clip programming like stand-up

comedy. Content options are obviously limited by the tiny cellphone frames – cooking segments, for instance, aren't feasible because screens are too small for viewers to see what the chef is doing.

Marcus says programming will likely be carrier-specific – he likens the carriers to mini-TV networks – while clips will be pay-per-use, charged to the customer's cellphone bill. "The idea is to make it affordable and accessible," he says, adding that 30-second clips will likely cost customers about \$1-\$1.50. **AB**