



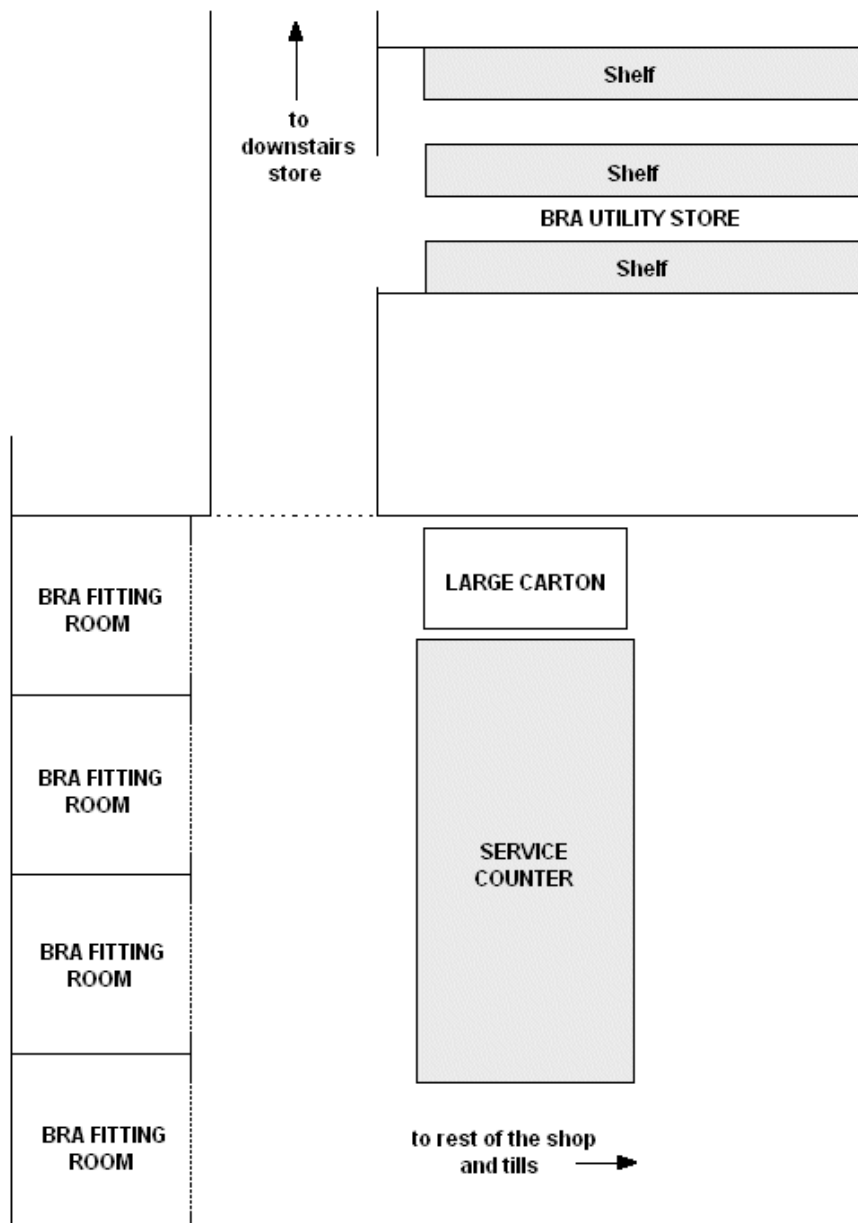
World-Class, Lean Performance Tutorials and Case Studies - Tutorial 03 deployment of lean thinking principles in the retail sector THE BRA-FITTING CASE

A chain of retailers, specialising in ladies' underwear, wants to improve the "bra-fitting" process.

Present Status

The present status is described here below:

The partial layout of a typical retail outlet (bra-fitting section) is here below. The most significant items in the layout are: 4 bra-fitting rooms - the bra "utility" store - a large "service" counter - a large cardboard carton.



The 4 fitting rooms are very plain: they are fitted with a mirror, hangers, and a sliding curtain.

The bra "utility" store consists of shelves on which the various models of bras are stored. They are positioned per size (i.e. 34D - 36EE - etc.) - per style (i.e. cup - balcony - "push-up" - etc.) - and per colour/finish. This is not the main bra store: this utility store contains approx. enough stock for one week sales, and is regularly refilled from the main store (downstairs).

Each bra is packed in a nylon bag, inserted in a stylish light-cardboard sleeve. Both the nylon bag and the cardboard box are labelled with the most relevant bra data (size - style - colour - finish.....).

The large "service" counter serves very little purpose: it displays promotional material (posters) and is also used as a utility area.

The large carton has a very special purpose that is described a bit below.

The bra-fitting process

There are a few specialised bra-fitting assistants who help ladies customers with their bras and swimwear needs. The bra-fitting job is a very delicate one: it requires sophisticated training, skills and rather long experience. The bra-fitting process (or the similar swimwear fitting process) consists of the following:

When a customer arrives, she is received by one of the bra-fitters (for simplicity called, from now on, "fitters) and lead to a fitting room. The customer undresses and the fitters take all necessary measurements. Then the fitter presents her recommendations, and listens to the customer about her specific preferences with regard to style, finish and colour. Eventually the requirements are clarified.

The fitter goes to the bra store, gets a bundle of bras (in their cardboard sleeve) of the required size (e.g. 36EE), assorted in styles, colours and finishes according to customer's preferences. She puts all the selected bras in a supermarket-type shopping basket. The number of selected bras may vary between a minimum of 6 (when requirements are very clear and specific) to 12 or more (when requirements are not really clear and preferences still "blurred"). This part of the process may take a few minutes or even much longer (see below).

Then she goes back to the fitting room, and the selection starts. The customers tries the various models, always assisted by the fitter with technical and aesthetical tips), and eventually she may choose to buy: one, two or even a few bras - or none at all - or she may require to be shown a second selection (generally other colours or finishes).

Eventually the choice is made. The customer dresses up again, while the fitter waits for her outside, in the counter area. She keeps on the counter the bras that the customer has chosen to buy. She throws all unselected bras in the large cardboard box.

This box was a "for-the-time-being" solution which dates back to many years before. The main reason why the box has always been used is because the fitters don't have time to put the unselected bras back into the store room, because putting back each bra in the nylon bag and each nylon bag in its cardboard sleeve takes time - and they don't want to leave the customer alone after she has dressed up again. So, all unselected bras, plus all nylon bags and cardboard sleeves are thrown higgledy-piggledy in the large carton. Also the nylon bags and cardboard sleeves of the chosen bras are thrown in the same large carton: in fact 99% of customers don't want to take with them neither the sleeves nor the nylon bags because it takes space in their handbag.

Eventually the fitter drives the customer to the till, greets her good-bye and starts assisting the next customer.

Unsatisfactory aspects

The unsatisfactory aspects of the present status are:

It happens most often, especially in the afternoon of busy days, that particular models required by a customers are not on the utility store shelves: this is because they have been shown to previous customers and, if un-chosen, thrown in the large carton. The net conclusion is that sometimes fitters have to "dig" and search in the large carton to find the model/s they are after, with horrible waste of time and the negative situation of customers having to wait longer time in the fitting rooms. Even worse, sometimes the fitters are compelled to go to the main store downstairs, and draw some stock of the wanted models (which may take up to 15 minutes.....).

At the end of each day, all fitters have to work one solid hour (paid overtime) to match unselected bras with their sleeves and cardboard boxes - repackage them - and put them back into storage.

Very often customers, after choosing their bras, continue shopping for underwear, pyjamas, and other goods. In which case, they just leave the selected bras at the tills to be more free while shopping. Sometimes, unfortunately, bras of different customers are mixed up. Some other times, customers forget completely about the bras they chose, pay for other goods they purchased, and go. So, at the end of the day, more bras must be collected from the tills and re-packaged with their sleeves and cardboard boxes, still lying in the large carton.

CONCLUSIONS

What can be done to make the overall process leaner?
What are your conclusions?

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World-Class Performance Tutorials - Tutorial 03 deployment of lean thinking principles in the retail sector solution & conclusions

Considerations

The proposed solution is based on the following considerations:

- Any waiting time longer than expected or actually required is a loss of value to the customer.
- The fact that customers may actually see fitters throwing bras (and swimwear) and their nylon bags and sleeves in the large carton is definitely not contributing to good image - moreover, some customers may get the impression that the bra they are testing has actually been tested by someone else (which is a reality in this type of retail outlet - however imagining or suspecting it and "visualizing" it are two totally different things....). Even worse it becomes, if waiting customers actually see fitters digging and searching for bras in the large carton...
- The fitting rooms do not have any surface on which bras and their packages can be put during testing. The only working area is the supermarket basket fitters use to carry bras. Which is both inconvenient and detrimental to good image.
- Practically all customers do not want nylon bags and sleeves for the bras they purchase.

PROPOSED LEAN SOLUTION

The proposed lean solution (one possible solution) is based on the usual core principles of Lean Thinking: Value - Flow - Pull. This is their deployment:

- The "utility" bra store is in a too far away location. The service counter is hardly utilised for any beneficial purpose. Why not transforming it into the utility store? Obviously some good shop-fitting has to be made, in order not to jeopardize the aesthetics of the area.
- The lower part of the counter becomes the utility store for those bras that are slow/slower moving, while the top part becomes the utility store for the fast moving ones. Bras are stored in their nylon bags but without the cardboard sleeve. Sleeves are stored next to each compartment, at easy reach, should some customer prefer to get them with the purchased bras.
- A number of special and dedicated shopping trolleys are designed and provided to each store. They are rather small in size but of the right height, so that they can be used as point of support during the fitting operation in the fitting rooms. If a customer hasn't a trolley, the fitter brings one to the fitting room with the required selection of bras. Any bra that remains unselected is immediately put bag in its nylon bag by the fitter, while the customer tries another one. Once the selection is made, the fitter brings the trolley to the utility store and, while the customer is dressing up, puts back the unwanted bras in their location. The chosen bras remain in the trolley, which is given to the customer to go to the till or to continue shopping. In this way two results are achieved: the fitter has time, means and possibility of putting back bras in their nylon bags (because they have a point of support and a working area) - the customer can continue shopping without leaving her chosen bras at the tills.

- The large carton disappears forever and ever.

With the above:

- Value to the customer is maximised - image is supported through the functionality of the entire process.
- Flow is practically continuous, and there is no residual waste (searching, moving, re-packaging, etc.).
- The entire process is pulled by the customer.

Which leads to the simple conclusion: Lean Thinking principles can conveniently be deployed in just any process of any industrial sector.

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