

# 10 Tips for Completing an Honest Store Critique

Store owners throughout the industry have discovered that business critiques from other independent home improvement retailers help them become better operators. Ask a fellow retailer or two to walk through your store, interact with employees and study your financials. They may highlight problem areas you haven't noticed and show you how to make strengths even stronger. Do your own critiques as well, in a consistent, disciplined way so continual improvement is built into your company culture. →

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## Look at your store's interior appearance like a customer.

Walk through your business from front to back and down each aisle and consider the merchandising, store cleanliness, organization and product outs. Are there better layout options? Is every department well-lit? Are the products creatively merchandised? Do the items on each shelf have their labels facing the aisle? Does your cross-merchandising make sense, and are the items in season? Do you see empty pegboards and messy shelves?

2

## Plan for improvement.

End every store critique by making a plan for action. Create detailed proposals for improving the problems your critiques have exposed. Assign the tasks outlined in your plans to specific employees who you know will take ownership of the projects. Then, work with your staff to set step-by-step goals with deadlines.

3

## Evaluate every product category, one at a time.

Assessing a category by itself gives you or the retailer critiquing your business the opportunity to drill into department-specific questions. Is your high-end outdoor power equipment dusty? Is cable in the electrical department neatly coiled? Do you have the right product mix in your outdoor living category? Are your housewares still on trend? Could you earn better margins on your impulse products?

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## Observe employees.

An objective perspective from someone your staff doesn't know will help you assess how your employees are performing when you're not present and whether a positive work culture is evident to customers. A mystery shopper program can be useful for gauging how well your employees are serving customers. However, insight from another retailer who is experienced in hiring and training could be even more helpful for zeroing in on how to improve.

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## Listen to customers.

Take shoppers' questions and complaints seriously, and don't let them be forgotten, no matter how busy you get. If one person thinks your bathrooms are dirty or you hear about a poor customer service experience, pay attention. Write the comments down and address complaints quickly. If possible, make sure that no one else, including the shopper who complained, will have the same issue again. Providing cleaning checklists and retraining or replacing an employee could be the solutions you need. If those changes don't eliminate an issue, that could mean you have bigger problems to address.

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## Make your store signage work for you.

Be sure your interior signage and any displays that protrude into aisles are attractive, easy to see and draw customers into each department. Make sure they don't confuse, distract or make the store noncompliant with the Americans with Disabilities Act. Directional signage should always be highly visible and up to date.

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## Give your store's exterior a 360-degree inspection.

Consider both the appearance and safety of a store and parking lot. Does the building look inviting? Are the window displays attractive and current? Is every window used well, or do some merely show the ends of interior fixtures? Could you better merchandise your outdoor displays or storage areas that are visible to customers? Is signage well-maintained and easy to see? Is the parking lot well-lit at night? Would replacing, adding or moving security cameras improve safety?

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## Ask for outside help every few years, if not annually.

Ask a retailer who isn't a competitor to walk your store and give you honest feedback. A fellow independent home improvement retailer will understand many of your business challenges and may be able to offer suggestions that never would have occurred to you. If you give that retailer permission to be boldly transparent about what they think you can improve, then you might hear some important, hard truths that no one else has the guts to tell you. An outsider will be more likely to notice problem areas than you will, especially if you're trying to improve a location you see daily. They may suggest quick fixes, as well as long-term goals to set.

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## Think strategically about your main aisle.

Your power aisle should be a well-planned and well-executed attention-getter. Plan ahead for creative displays, which showcase seasonally appropriate products, and consider the products you place in your dump bins. Dump bins are a good solution to merchandise impulse and sale items, but ensure they don't look messy.

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## Keep the store critique process consistent.

Use a checklist or worksheet as a standardized tool to assess your operation. Doing so will help you consistently evaluate your business over time and notice issues you wouldn't have spotted if you hadn't looked for them. If fellow retailers critique your store, then ask them to use the standard list so they don't miss anything. To download a critique sheet, visit [TheRedT.com/critique-sheet](http://TheRedT.com/critique-sheet).