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to a customer in the fitting room.

Typically, the pager indicates the fitting room number so that the associate can respond almost immediately. The Page-Alert system is set up to continue paging the associate at regular time intervals until the customer is serviced and the paging system is reset — a process that can only be carried out at the point of service.

Alert designs and programs each system according to the specific needs of the retailer. Typically, though, the system is set up so that every 30 seconds it re-pages the associate, alerting him or her to how much time has passed since the customer first signaled for help. At a certain point, if no one on the selling floor has responded to the customer request, the store manager also receives a page.

**SERVICE STRATEGY** The system can be installed in older stores as well as new units or remodels, says Laney, who adds that the real key to making it work is grounded in the company's customer service strategy. "Our systems work best in retail chains that already have established strategies on the selling floor which ring the register," she stresses. "Gap, for example, had a blueprint for customer service in place and its stores were properly staffed. First we worked with them to understand what they were doing. Then, we converted that plan into a process aided by technology."

San Francisco-based Gap Inc. has already begun installing call buttons in the fitting room of its Gap stores, according to vice president and treasurer Leroy Barnes, who recently mentioned the new in-store technology in a presentation made at Paine Webber's Growth and Technology conference.

Alert Technologies executives encourage retailers to control the selling process as much as possible. They suggest that fitting rooms be locked, for example, thus ensuring that the shopper is met by a sales associate, who uses the interaction as an opportunity to invite the customer to use the call button technology. In addition, this one-to-one meeting is a chance for the sales associates to try cross selling and up-selling.

The call button technology is "a step in the right direction," says Joseph Pine II, co-founder of Aurora, Ohio-based Strategic Horizons and co-author of "The Experience Economy." "It gives customers the opportunity to take control of

the situation — to get help when they need it and want it."

Still, Pine cautions that it's the personal interaction that follows use of the call button that will shape the total experience. "It's not a panacea for customer service or customer retention, but it's obvious how valuable it could be if the sales associate is on the ball," he says.

Lewis Carbone, founder and chief executive officer of Experience Engineering, an experience management consulting firm based in Minneapolis, believes that retailers that use systems such as Page-Alert to manage customer experiences can boost customer loyalty.

"Customer loyalty cannot be bought for discounts, miles or points. Customers are loyal to experiences they prefer," writes Carbone in a brief entitled "Leveraging Customer Experience in the Twenty-First Century." "Loyal customers return because the experiences you create are preferable to those delivered by your competitors."

Page-Alert is one component of a suite of modular applications offered by Alert Technologies that can be installed at retail. Associate-Alert, another tool designed to ensure that customers receive attention on-demand, uses call buttons strategically placed on the selling floor. Like the paging system, sales associates wear pagers that vibrate when the call button is pressed.

The type of system installed is determined by several factors, with the number of sales associates weighing heavily on the final decision. "Shoppers don't seem to have any problems with the idea of pressing a button for service, but once they press it they expect someone to show up," says Laney. "We've found that the customer's perception of time begins to get distorted after about a minute and a

half. From that point on, they're annoyed and that's exactly what a retailer doesn't want. Having enough sales associates to make this work is imperative."

While the call button system seems relatively simple on the surface, the software component of the Page-Alert and Customer-Alert systems collects and processes numerous types of data, which retailers can use to improve a store's overall profitability. Depending on how the retailer chooses to set up the system, data collected via the Alert products can be accessed on the web in a secure environment. Thus corporate, regional, district and store personnel are empowered to support the customer service strategies.

**STORE TRAFFIC** For example, Advanced Real Time Solutions, another application provided by Alert, gives management the information needed to instantly assess and modify the customer service strategy based on the rate of inbound store traffic.

"Every week, for a couple of hours, stores are as busy as they are during the holiday season. Some retailers have strategies for handling the ebb and flow of traffic, but most are caught off guard and ill-equipped to react," explains Frank Giuliano, director of marketing for Alert. "Our system gives store management a tool to monitor the level of traffic and redirect store personnel to potential bottlenecks."

Alert's system, consisting of a small unit that measures traffic counts, is linked to a pager. Once a certain level of traffic is reached, the pager alerts the store manager, who can execute flexible real time strategies such as opening additional POS terminals, redirecting associates to the fitting room area and moving associates involved in non-sales activities to the selling floor.

Alert Technologies executives claim the return on investment for these applications varies according to intensity of the system and the amount of time the retailer spends interfacing with it. Even so, Laney suggests that most retailers yield a return on their investment within a year.

"The fitting room call button system is a good ROI example," says Laney. "By servicing the customer in the fitting room, the retailer not only has the opportunity to convert more customers and increase the units per transaction, but can also lower shrink. That's all going to have a positive impact on the bottom line." — *Susan Reda*

**STORES**