Universal Associates:
Hiring, Training and Staffing

Perfecting the UA Model

Advice and direction from Sandy Dixon, one of America's leading experts on implementing the universal associate model for the financial industry

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Sandy Dixon & Associates (SDA) *is a leading national consulting firm specializing in transformational retail strategy for the banking industry. It conducts an incisive discovery and design process in two phases to determine how to enhance the customer/member (customer) experience at a lower cost to the financial institution (FI). SDA typically reviews 25 key elements of an FI's current and potential retail strategy. This process uncovers dysfunctions and inefficiencies, whether it is branch design, people, processes and/or technology—that prevent branch staff from functioning at maximum potential. SDA then provides a retail strategy roadmap to enhance customer experience and support a multichannel service delivery that fulfills the expectations of today's customer and reduces costs for the FI. Further, SDA can help enable significant customer migration to retail automation.*

Sandy Dixon: Hiring, Training and Staffing the Universal Associate Model

Planning and implementing the paradigm shift to an open-concept environment with UAs and advanced technology can seem like a daunting task for financial institutions. We spoke to Sandy Dixon, CEO of SDA, about key aspects of the transformational banking model and SDA's chief areas of expertise: hiring practices and training for a universal associate strategy.

Given that there seem to be several different names for this kind of branch employee, our first question was, "What should we call this new breed of banker?"

Universal associates is a functional description in the industry. Financial institutions refer to them as Relationship Bankers, Relationship Associates, or Member Services Associates, to name a few. We are beginning to see more institutions use the term consultant in the name. Ultimately it's finding the right people and applying a specific training program to yield an enhanced customer experience, whatever the title.

The dialogue tower (or teller pod), is typically where universal bankers are stationed, with some being trained to roam the floor, assisting customers who have questions, and educating them on the use of new technology. This is similar to the role of the staff in an Apple store, or a Verizon branch.

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What is a universal associate?

Universal associates are employees who are charged with building customer relationships with the FI by matching products and services to the needs of the customer. They are the one-stop shop as they assist customers with using new products/services, processing transactions, resolving service issues, learning about time-saving technology, and investigating ancillary products such as loans, investments, insurance, mortgages, etc. The job functions will vary based on the technology (e.g., recycler/dialogue towers, assisted service devices, self-service devices, video sales, video service) used.

There are several changes occurring in branch banking. Solidus's expertise lies in designing the most efficiently configured space for equipment and people. We specialize in the physical transformation. SDA focuses on the cultural and operational transformation. We have spent years honing our expertise in spatial programming and have learned much from our mistakes—and those of others.

What are the biggest mistakes you see when financial institutions attempt the transition to a universal associate model?

One of the biggest mistakes is not hiring someone who embraces your core values and is the desired personality type. If you hire those who don't understand your core values or don't themselves possess those same values, they won't "live the brand." This will be evident to your customers. When conducting interviews, determine what the applicant's core values are. It requires a different style of interviewing.

Determining the right personality type requires more than looking at a few references. You really need a wide range of sources to verify someone's suitability. The questions you ask in the interview should be designed to reveal relevant information with personality type and core values being the most important. But there are other factors. Interview questions and role-playing should be structured around exactly what it is you're expecting that person to deliver on the retail floor. People with a teaching background can be very effective in educating consumers on products, services, and technology. People with modern retail experience also make excellent UAs as they've been trained in the exact type of interactive service required of progressive financial institutions.

SDA and Solidus make your branch spaces and services fit together like the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. Failing to have the organization's culture aligned with the design of the physical space is a costly mistake. I remember one institution that had dialogue towers but was still using tellers. The dialogue tower looked like a teller line given the way it was configured. The tellers said they

liked it like that because "the customers can stand on their side, and we can stand on our side,

and we don't overlap into each other's space." This is the opposite of what you want actually. Relationship bankers share the space with customers and bring them close. A universal associate should feel comfortable in that kind of engaging environment. It's vital they're always on the same page as the customer so that they understand the specific needs of each customer.

A consultative mind-set is essential for any UA. To be a good consultant you have to be able to listen well and interact fluently with the customer. You must be both financially astute and able to relate to customer financial concerns. The ideal UA must understand how customers make financial decisions and be able to match appropriate products and services to customers' needs. For example, a staff member who has financed a house or car will have a better grasp of customer needs. If a couple has just had a baby, the relationship banker should be asking, "What can you do to prepare for when this baby goes to college?"

Financial institutions should look for service champions and good relationship builders. Results-oriented, energetic people who engage well with others and are great listeners and communicators tend to be naturals when it comes to serving others.

Good UAs must also be technology oriented. It's hard to explain to a customer the value of technology if you don't understand it yourself. When interviewing candidates, ask what's the latest app they've downloaded on their phone. Ask them what banking technology they use to conduct their personal banking. The answers to these types of questions are important.

A good recruit doesn't necessarily have to come with a ready-made understanding of all financial products and services. What is important is that they "really get" today's retail and have the potential to relate to customers at any point in the consumer lifecycle.

A *well- designed branch facilitates a universal associate's ability to greet customers, open new accounts, take loan applications, and perform more efficient traditional teller transactions with the help of a cash recycler. It enables the UA to fully engage deeply with customers.*

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Branch managers must understand their role in managing the UA environment. Staffing effectively and efficiently is critical. Branch data to determine traffic trends by the hour, day, week and month must be gathered and used. In addition, especially in a UA environment, the type of transactions being performed, volume, typical time required to complete transactions, peak/lulls must be accurately determined to staff properly. Inadequate staffing will either produce a less than desirable customer experience or cost the institution money. It is regrettable when an institution gets all the other elements right and fails to staff strategically.

Dialogue towers remove the staff/customer barrier and encourage interaction.

How long is basic training for a UA? Are there specific milestones beyond that?

Typically you are looking at an eight- to 10-week training program for this process. The initial piece is communicating the culture of the institution, who the key players are, and the strategic goals of the company. Understanding where the financial institution is going and their role in that achievement is paramount. Especially important is recognizing the roles of the departments that support the UA and the importance of working together as a team. I cannot stress enough how important it is that the staff have a solid grasp of the products and services and how they fit into the life-cycle of a consumer. The ability to assist the customer with financial decisions will improve with experience once the basics are learned. Beyond that, much depends on how the financial institution defines a career path for those UAs. After a year or two or three, when at a point to make independent decisions, the UA can explore their next career step.

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Ongoing training and refresher courses that tie the training back to the core values of the institution are essential for ongoing responsiveness and success. Helping UAs understand the design of the branch and its different zones is critical to their engaging with customers.

*What are the different levels of expertise for UAs?*

We recommend two levels—a beginning level and a senior level. Beyond that, you can have people grow into retail management or another area of banking that interests them. If you educate staff about core values, products, and services from the beginning, then the longer they're amassing knowledge the greater the likelihood they'll become effective ambassadors for the brand. Once a relationship banker is able to make decisions on their own and is fluent with the finer points, they'll be confident enough to take on new responsibilities. They will then be a valuable resource for the organization and customers alike.

How are today's operational practices different from the traditional approach? Do you find much resistance from entrenched teams when you conduct your discovery phase? Are financial institutions becoming aware that the whole game is changing and it's not just a "build it and they will come" scenario anymore?

The big difference now is that financial institutions are bringing in seasoned transformational consultants who are well-versed in detecting practices/processes that hinder a successful implementation of a UA environment. It is crucial that these organizations don't become defensive or play a blame game when these things are revealed. *You don't know what you don't know*, and there is little training in the industry that prepares management in these new concepts and how they fit together holistically in terms of FI retail strategy. They need to regroup and understand that what's truly important is to move forward together. Today, a bank or credit union must truly believe in their core values and live those values from the top to the bottom of the organization. Bankers are starting to understand the reasons for the holistic approach. They're realizing that you can't just call a teller a UA and expect things to change on their own. They're developing an awareness of the importance of the equipment required and that it is working correctly and consistently. Are their processes compatible with that technology? Does the design of the space allow UAs to do their job as planned? Can they function efficiently with a UA in that environment? Above all, they must harness the power of teamwork. Without cohesion, the branch will not function effectively.

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Are dialogue towers the only way to station UAs, or are there other models?

There are other models, such as using assisted or self-service technologies, that have been very effectively deployed. Some financial institutions choose to utilize a greeter station, with a static person situated in it. We prefer a model in which universal associates are free to roam the floor in a more open role that allows them to support, service, consult, and help educate customers. Some institutions use towers and automation simultaneously. This influences where the UA stands, where they greet customers, etc. This arrangement is often used to transition because customers rarely go to a machine when there's a human teller available, regardless of the versatility of the technology; this defeats the purpose of automation. The rate at which customers adapt to new branch technologies relates directly to the staff truly knowing and using the products and technologies they're promoting. The UA must be comfortable using the technology to put the customer at ease using it.
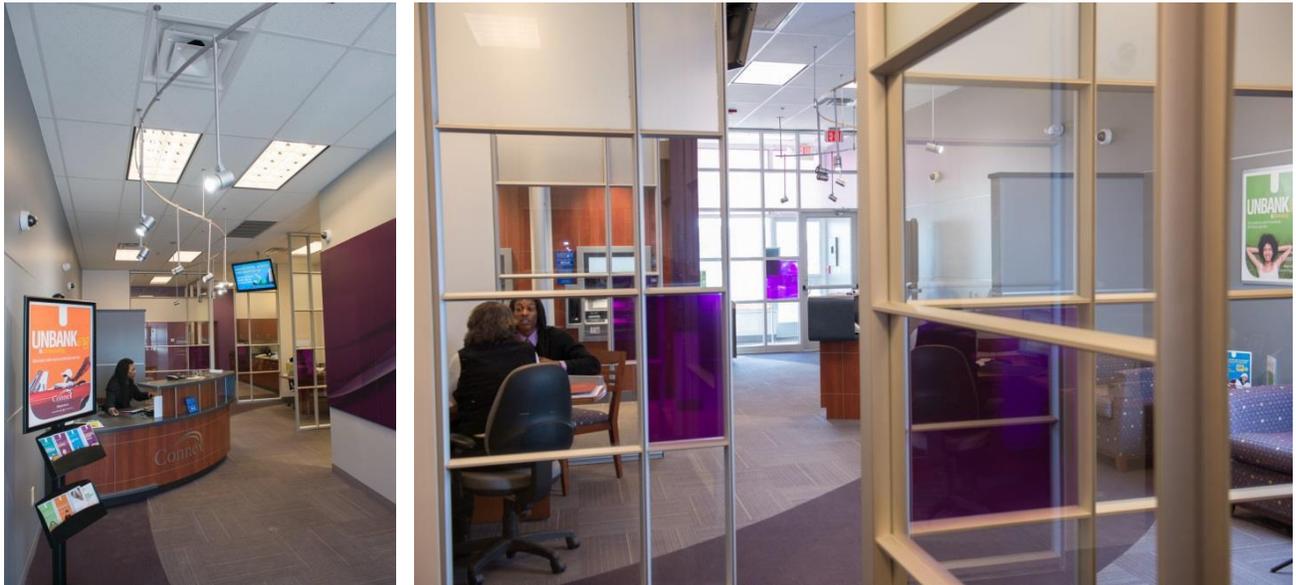
A concierge station (above left) in a recently designed credit union. The UA can greet members here. If necessary, a more involved consultation can take place at a desk in a private booth (above, right).

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