Why Retail Fundamentals Matter More Than Ever for Small Businesses

By Kylie Ross Sibert, Retail Alliance

Retail is hard. Anyone who's ever run a store knows this firsthand. For independent retailers, the challenge is even greater. Unlike national brands with entire teams dedicated to inventory, merchandising, marketing, and customer experience, small business owners wear all those hats—and more.

At Retail Alliance, we work with hundreds of independent retailers across Hampton Roads, and we see the passion, creativity, and resilience they bring to their businesses every day. But we also see the gaps, especially when it comes to retail fundamentals.

That's why we recently partnered with retail expert Liza Amlani of Retail Strategy Group to deliver a two-day training focused on the building blocks of successful retail. Liza is the go-to expert in merchandising, product creation and accelerating speed to market and one of RETHINK Retail's Top Retail Influencers of 2022, 2023, 2024 and 2025, named one of NRF 2025's Top Retail Voices, founder of The Chief Merchant and The Merchant Life™, and author of The Whole Sale and The Material Life.

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What we learned (and what we want to share with the broader business community) is that mastering the fundamentals isn't optional. It's essential.

The Fundamentals Are Universal

Whether you're selling apparel, gifts, home goods, or vintage finds, the principles of good retail apply across every category. Liza's training covered six key areas:

1. Brand DNA & Point of View – Your brand should tell a clear story across every touchpoint, from your product mix to your marketing and customer experience.
2. Inventory Planning – Metrics like sell-through, weeks of supply, and open-to-buy aren't just for big-box stores. They help small retailers manage cash flow and reduce risk.
3. Merchandising & Product Curation – Knowing which products are your heroes, balancing seasonless vs. fashion (trend-driven items), and curating assortments with discipline can make or break your margins.
4. Merchandising Execution – Visual storytelling through zoning, window displays, and signage helps translate strategy into sales.
5. Customer & Clienteling – Building long-term loyalty means finding the right balance between technology and the human touch.
6. Marketing & Community – Your brand doesn't exist in a vacuum. Leveraging user-generated content, ambassadors, and local creators can deepen your connection with customers.

Learning by Doing

One of the most impactful parts of the training was taking these concepts out of the classroom and into real stores. We visited four local businesses - Ever Jane, A Little Something Boutique, Quality Shops, and Nomad - and applied what we learned in real time.

These store walks revealed something powerful: even retailers without formal training can make meaningful improvements with the right guidance. From visual merchandising tweaks to assortment planning strategies, small changes led to big insights.

Why It Matters

Independent retailers are the heartbeat of our communities. They create jobs, activate neighborhoods, and offer unique experiences that big chains can't replicate. But they also face intense pressure, from rising costs to shifting consumer expectations.

Understanding retail fundamentals helps level the playing field. It empowers store owners to make smarter decisions, improve profitability, and build stronger relationships with their customers.

As Jenny Crittenden, President & CEO of Retail Alliance, put it: “Our independent retailers don’t have the same resources as national brands, so we brought in Liza Amlani - whose expertise reflects the caliber of thought leadership Retail Alliance consistently seeks - to close that gap and elevate our members’ capabilities. In just two days, she trained our team on retail fundamentals, merchandising best practices, and how to level up the in-store experience.”

Moving Forward

We’re already planning the next phase of training with Retail Strategy Group and taking this knowledge and offering it to our members via consultative services. We’re committed to helping our members - and all small retailers - build sustainable, successful businesses rooted in strategy and community.

This initiative reflects RA’s forward-thinking approach to member support. By investing in high-caliber expertise and training our staff to deploy foundational retail assessments, we’re not just responding to industry needs - we’re anticipating them. Whether through data studies, strategic partnerships, or hands-on training, Retail Alliance continues to redefine what a trade association can deliver.

Retail isn’t just about selling products. It’s about connection, creativity, and continuous learning. And when small businesses master the fundamentals, they don’t just survive - they thrive.

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