The California Merchant

News for the California Merchant Safety Association

A great first impression goes a long way

First impressions matter. Whether greeting a customer who walks into a retail store, welcoming a client to an office, or arriving at someone's home to service an HVAC system, those first few moments help shape the customer's entire experience. A positive first impression builds trust, eases concerns, and sets the stage for productive, respectful interactions.

For small businesses in particular, where reputation and repeat customers are essential, every interaction is an opportunity to strengthen customer relationships.

Start with a Warm Welcome

The first step in making a good impression is to acknowledge the customer promptly. A warm smile, friendly greeting, and eye contact let people know they have been noticed and are welcome.

Even if you're helping another customer or finishing a task, a simple, "I'll be right with you," lets customers know they haven't been overlooked. Feeling acknowledged is often the first step toward feeling valued.

Remember that customers are often forming opinions about your business within the first few seconds of an interaction. A positive greeting helps establish a friendly atmosphere from the very beginning.

Listen Before You Solve

One of the most valuable customer service skills is active listening. Customers want to know that someone genuinely understands their needs or concerns.

Rather than interrupting or assuming you already know the solution, allow customers to explain their situation completely. Nodding, maintaining appropriate eye contact, and asking thoughtful follow-up questions demonstrate that you're paying attention.

It also helps to summarize what you've heard. For example:

- "So your furnace stopped working yesterday evening?"
- "You're looking for a birthday gift for your granddaughter?"
- "You'd like to compare a few different service options before making a decision?"

Repeating back the customer's concern confirms that you've understood correctly while reassuring them that they're being heard.

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July-August 2026
Vol. 38, No. 4

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Every minute counts when it comes to a stroke

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Service: Clear, honest communication is key

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Professionalism Builds Confidence

Customers naturally feel more comfortable when employees appear prepared and professional.

Professionalism includes:

- Clean, appropriate clothing or uniforms
- Good personal grooming
- A neat and organized work area
- Visible name badges when applicable
- Friendly body language and a positive attitude

For HVAC technicians and other service professionals, arriving in a clean vehicle, introducing yourself, and wearing company identification immediately builds credibility. In retail and office settings, tidy displays, organized counters, and uncluttered reception areas communicate that the business is attentive to detail.

Communicate Clearly

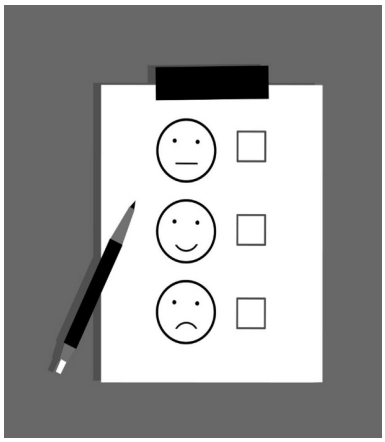
Customers appreciate clear, honest communication.

Whenever possible, explain products, services, or repairs using everyday language instead of technical terms. If specialized terminology is necessary, take a moment to explain what it means.

Encourage customers to ask questions, and never make them feel rushed or embarrassed for seeking clarification. When people understand what you're recommending—and why—they're much more likely to feel confident in their decisions.

Small Courtesies Make a Big Difference

Especially for businesses that provide services in customers' homes or workplaces, thoughtful gestures leave



lasting impressions.

Simple acts of professionalism include:

- Arriving on time
- Introducing yourself before beginning work
- Explaining what you plan to do
- Wearing protective shoe covers when appropriate
- Respecting the customer's home or workspace
- Cleaning up thoroughly before leaving

These actions show respect for the customer and demonstrate pride in your work.

Stay Calm Under Pressure

Not every customer interaction begins on a positive note. Some customers may already be frustrated, worried, or stressed before they speak with you.

Remaining calm, speaking respectfully, and focusing on solutions instead of blame can quickly reduce tension. A patient employee who listens carefully and responds professionally often turns a difficult interaction into a positive experience.

Customers may not remember every detail of the conversation, but they almost always remember how they were treated.

End on a Positive Note

A strong finish is just as important as a strong beginning.

Before ending the interaction:

- Ask whether the customer has any additional questions.
- Make sure they understand the next steps.
- Thank them sincerely for choosing your business.
- Invite them to contact you if they need additional assistance.

These simple closing steps reassure customers that they remain important to your business even after the transaction is complete.

Every Interaction Represents Your Business

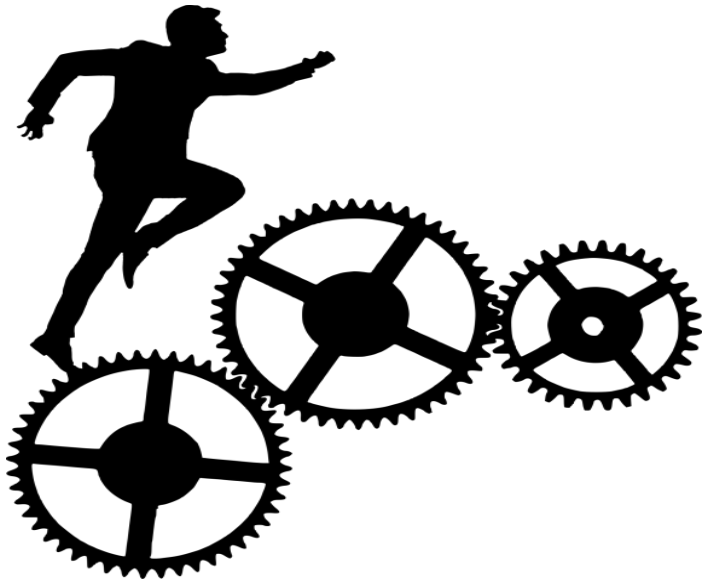
Making a great first impression doesn't require elaborate sales techniques or lengthy conversations. It comes from consistently showing respect, listening carefully, communicating clearly, and treating every customer as an individual.

When customers feel heard, comfortable, and confident that they're in capable hands, they are far more likely to return, recommend your business to others, and become loyal customers for years to come.

As the saying goes, people may forget what you said, but they will remember how you made them feel. By making every customer feel welcome, respected, and valued, employees become ambassadors not only for excellent customer service but for the business as a whole.

Begin your morning the right way

How you begin your morning can set the tone for the rest of your day. While everyone's schedule and responsibilities are different, establishing a consistent morning routine can improve productivity, reduce stress, and support both physical and mental well-being. Whether you're heading to the office, managing a retail store, attending school, or working from home, a thoughtful morning routine can help you arrive feeling prepared, focused, and energized.



Get good sleep

The key to a successful morning actually begins the night before. Getting adequate sleep is one of the most important factors in overall health and daily performance. Most adults need between seven and nine hours of quality sleep each night, while children and teenagers generally require even more. A regular sleep schedule—going to bed and waking up at about the same time each day—helps regulate your body's internal clock, making it easier to fall asleep and wake up naturally.

Creating a relaxing bedtime routine can also improve sleep quality. Limiting screen time before bed, avoiding heavy meals or excessive caffeine late in the evening, and keeping your bedroom cool, dark, and quiet all contribute to better rest. A well-rested body is more prepared to meet the physical and mental demands of the day ahead.

Don't hit the snooze button

When it's time to wake up, try to resist the temptation to hit the snooze button repeatedly. Although those extra few minutes may seem appealing, fragmented sleep can actually leave you feeling groggier than getting up with your first alarm. Placing your alarm clock or phone across the room can encourage you to get out of bed, and opening the curtains or stepping into natural light shortly after waking helps signal to your brain that it's time to be alert.

Start with intentional movement

Many people find that starting the morning slowly and intentionally helps reduce stress. Instead of immediately checking emails, social media, or the news, consider spending the first few minutes stretching, practicing deep breathing, reading something uplifting, or simply enjoying a quiet cup of coffee or tea. These small moments can create a calmer mindset before the day's responsibilities begin.

Physical activity is another excellent way to prepare for the day. You don't have to complete an intense workout every morning to benefit from exercise. Even 10 to 20 minutes of movement can improve circulation, increase energy, and elevate your mood. A brisk walk, light stretching, yoga, or a short strength-training routine can help loosen stiff muscles and improve mental focus. Regular morning exercise has also been associated with better concentration and reduced stress throughout the day.

Feed your body well

After moving your body, it's important to fuel it properly. Breakfast truly can be an important meal, particularly if it includes foods that provide sustained energy. A balanced breakfast containing protein, whole grains, healthy fats, and fruit can help stabilize blood sugar levels and improve concentration. Options such as oatmeal topped with berries and nuts, whole-grain toast with peanut butter, yogurt with fruit and granola, or eggs with whole-grain toast provide lasting energy without the mid-morning crash that often follows sugary pastries or sweetened cereals.

Hydration is equally important. After several hours of sleep, your body naturally becomes dehydrated. Drinking a glass of water shortly after waking can help replenish fluids and support concentration, digestion, and overall energy levels. Keeping a reusable water bottle nearby throughout the morning makes it easier to continue this healthy habit.

Take stock of the day

One of the biggest challenges many people face is staying focused once the day begins. Taking a few minutes each morning to review your schedule and identify your top priorities can make a significant difference. Rather than trying to tackle everything at once, choose two or three important tasks to complete first. Writing a simple to-do list or checking your calendar before leaving

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Task-tracking tools create order from chaos

Running a small or medium-sized business often means balancing dozens of responsibilities at once. Managers may be coordinating employee schedules, monitoring inventory, tracking customer orders, planning marketing campaigns, and responding to customer needs—all while keeping daily operations running smoothly. Without a reliable system for organizing work, it's easy for important tasks to be overlooked or deadlines to be missed.

Task tracking tools provide a practical solution by helping businesses organize projects, assign responsibilities, monitor progress, and improve communication. Whether your team works in an office, a retail store, or a combination of both, the right tool can increase productivity while reducing confusion and duplication of effort.

Why Task Tracking Matters

Many small businesses begin by managing tasks through emails, sticky notes, paper calendars, or verbal reminders. While these methods may work for very small teams, they often become difficult to manage as a business grows. Employees may not know who is responsible for a particular project, managers may struggle to follow up on assignments, and deadlines can easily slip through the cracks.

Task tracking software creates a central location where employees can see what needs to be completed, who is responsible, and when work is due. Many systems also allow managers to attach files, leave comments, set reminders, and monitor project status in real time.

For businesses with employees working in multiple locations or on hybrid schedules, these tools provide a shared workspace that keeps everyone connected regardless of where they are working.

Features to Look For

Not every business needs a sophisticated project management system. Small businesses often benefit most from software that is intuitive, affordable, and easy to implement.

Useful features include:

- Assigning tasks to specific employees
- Due dates and reminders
- Priority levels
- Shared calendars
- File attachments
- Progress tracking
- Mobile access
- Integration with email and calendars
- Collaboration tools for comments and updates

The best tool is often the one that employees will actually use consistently.

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Morning: Create good habits for personal well-being

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home can help reduce feelings of overwhelm and keep you on track throughout the day.

Prep the night before

Preparing as much as possible the night before can also make mornings less hectic. Laying out clothes, packing lunches, organizing backpacks or work bags, and gathering important documents ahead of time reduces the number of decisions you have to make after waking up. These simple preparations can save valuable time and help prevent last-minute stress.

Don't rush your travel

Allowing enough time to travel to work or school is another often-overlooked part of a successful morning routine. Rushing out the door or worrying about being late can increase anxiety before the day has even begun. Leaving a few minutes earlier than necessary provides a cushion for unexpected traffic, public transportation delays, or other unforeseen circumstances. If you work from home, try to begin your workday at a consistent time and create a brief transition—such as taking a short walk or enjoying a cup of coffee before sitting down at your desk—to mentally separate home life from work responsibilities.

Embrace the unexpected

It's also helpful to remember that no morning routine has to be perfect. Some days will be busier than others, and unexpected events can disrupt even the best plans. The goal isn't perfection—it's consistency. Building a routine that fits your lifestyle and supports your well-being is far more valuable than trying to follow an unrealistic schedule.

A positive morning routine doesn't require expensive equipment or hours of free time. By getting adequate sleep, waking up intentionally, moving your body, eating a nutritious breakfast, staying hydrated, planning your day, and allowing yourself enough time to arrive without rushing, you can create habits that support both your personal well-being and your professional success.

When mornings begin with purpose instead of chaos, the benefits often extend throughout the entire day. With a little planning and consistency, anyone can develop a routine that helps them feel refreshed, focused, and ready to take on whatever challenges lie ahead.

Store and handle cleaning chemicals safely

Cleaning products are essential for maintaining a healthy and sanitary workplace, whether in a retail store, office, restaurant, or service business. However, many common cleaning products contain chemicals that can cause burns, respiratory irritation, eye injuries, or other health hazards if they are not stored and handled properly. Developing safe chemical storage practices protects employees, customers, and the workplace while reducing the risk of accidents.

Keep chemicals in their original containers

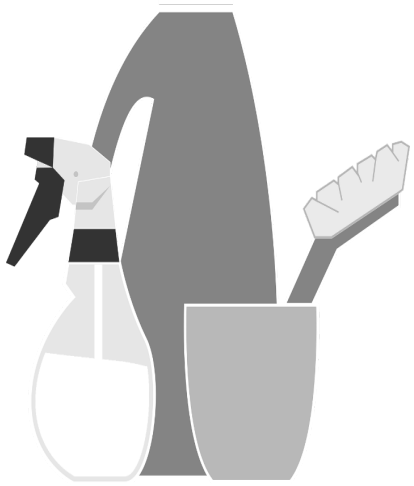
One of the most important safety practices is to **keep all cleaning products in their original containers**. Manufacturer labels contain important information about ingredients, hazards, safe handling procedures, and first aid instructions. Transferring chemicals into beverage bottles, food containers, or unlabeled spray bottles can lead to accidental misuse or dangerous confusion.

Cool, dry, ventilated storage

Cleaning chemicals should be stored in a designated area that is cool, dry, and well ventilated. Whenever possible, storage cabinets should be locked or otherwise secured to prevent unauthorized access. Shelves should be sturdy, and heavier containers should be stored on lower shelves to reduce the chance of spills or injuries if a container falls. Storage areas should also be kept organized so products are easy to locate and inspect.

Don't combine chemicals!

An important aspect of chemical safety is understanding that **not all cleaning products are compatible**. Certain chemicals can react violently when mixed. For example, combining bleach with ammonia creates toxic chloramine gases that can cause serious respiratory injuries. Mixing bleach with acidic



cleaners, such as some toilet bowl or rust removers, can also release dangerous chlorine gas. Employees should always follow manufacturer instructions and never mix cleaning products unless the label specifically indicates that it is safe to do so.

Provide SDS for all products

Businesses should ensure that **Safety Data Sheets (SDSs)** are readily available for all hazardous cleaning products used in the workplace. These documents provide detailed information about safe handling, storage requirements, recommended personal protective equipment (PPE), emergency procedures, and spill response. Employees should know where SDSs are kept and how to access them if questions arise.

Use gloves, goggles, and mask when appropriate

Using appropriate personal protective equipment is another important part of chemical safety. Depending on the product being used, this may include disposable or chemical-resistant gloves, safety glasses or goggles, aprons, or face protection. Good ventilation is also important when working with products that produce strong fumes, especially in small or enclosed spaces.

Inspect containers for integrity and expiration dates

Regular inspections help identify potential problems before they become safety hazards. Containers should be checked periodically for leaks, cracks, damaged lids, or faded labels. Expired or deteriorated products should be disposed of according to local regulations rather than poured down drains or discarded improperly. Promptly cleaning up spills using the procedures recommended on the product label or Safety Data Sheet helps prevent slips, accidental exposure, and environmental contamination.

Ensure all employees understand proper handling and safe use

Finally, employee training is one of the most effective ways to prevent chemical-related accidents. New employees should receive instruction on safe storage, proper handling, emergency procedures, and the importance of reading product labels before use. Refresher training can reinforce these practices and help employees stay current on any new products introduced into the workplace.

Safe chemical storage is more than simply finding a place to keep supplies. It is an important part of creating a healthy, organized, and well-managed workplace. By storing chemicals properly, following label directions, using appropriate protective equipment, and providing regular employee training, small businesses can reduce risks and maintain a safer environment for everyone.

Recognizing a stroke: Every minute counts

A stroke is a medical emergency that requires immediate attention. It occurs when blood flow to part of the brain is interrupted or when a blood vessel in the brain ruptures. Without a steady supply of oxygen-rich blood, brain cells begin to die within minutes. Quick recognition and prompt medical treatment can significantly improve a person's chances of recovery and reduce the risk of permanent disability.

Because strokes can happen to anyone—at work, at home, or in public—it's important for everyone to know the warning signs and how to respond.

What Is a Stroke?

There are two main types of strokes. An ischemic stroke is the most common and occurs when a blood clot blocks an artery supplying blood to the brain. A hemorrhagic stroke occurs when a weakened blood vessel ruptures, causing bleeding in or around the brain.

In either case, time is critical. The sooner medical professionals can begin treatment, the better the chances of limiting damage to the brain.

Know the Warning Signs: Think "F.A.S.T."

One of the easiest ways to recognize a possible stroke is to remember the acronym F.A.S.T.

F – Face Drooping: Ask the person to smile. Does one side of the face droop or appear numb?

A – Arm Weakness: Ask the person to raise both arms. Does one arm drift downward or seem weak or numb?

S – Speech Difficulty: Listen carefully. Is the person's speech slurred, difficult to understand, or are they unable to repeat a simple sentence correctly?

T – Time to Call 911: If you observe any of these signs—even if they

disappear after a few minutes—call emergency services immediately.

Other Symptoms to Watch For

Not every stroke presents the same way. Additional warning signs may include:

- Sudden numbness or weakness, especially on one side of the body
- Confusion or difficulty understanding others
- Sudden trouble seeing in one or both eyes
- Difficulty walking, loss of balance, or dizziness
- A sudden, severe headache with no known cause
- Sudden difficulty swallowing

Symptoms often appear quickly and without warning. Never ignore them or assume they will simply go away.

What to Do While Waiting for Emergency Help

If you suspect someone is having a stroke, call 911 immediately. Do not attempt to drive the person to the hospital unless emergency services are unavailable. Paramedics can begin life-saving treatment on the way and alert the hospital to prepare for the patient's arrival.

While waiting for help:

- Stay calm and reassure the person that help is on the way.
- Note the time when symptoms first began or when the person was last known to be well. This information is extremely important because certain stroke treatments are only effective within a specific time window.
- Help the person sit or lie down in a comfortable position. If they are unconscious but breathing normally, carefully roll them onto their side to help keep the airway clear.
- Loosen tight clothing around the neck if necessary.
- Do not give the person food, water, medication, or aspirin unless specifically instructed by emergency medical personnel. A stroke can affect swallowing, increasing the risk of choking, and aspirin can be dangerous in certain types of strokes.
- Stay with the person, monitor their condition, and be prepared to provide information to emergency responders.
-

Every Minute Matters

The effects of a stroke can vary from mild weakness to significant disability, but rapid treatment can dramatically improve outcomes. Learning to recognize the warning signs and responding quickly may save a life—or help someone recover with fewer long-term complications.

Knowing the signs of a stroke is an important life skill for everyone. Whether you're at work, shopping, or spending time with family and friends, recognizing the symptoms and acting immediately could make all the difference. When it comes to stroke, don't wait to see if symptoms improve. Call 911 right away—because every minute counts.

SAFETY ... IT PAYS

Get a leg up on proper ladder usage

Ladders are common tools in many workplaces, from retail stores and warehouses to offices and service businesses. Employees may use them to stock shelves, retrieve supplies, change light bulbs, hang signs, or perform routine maintenance. Because ladder use is so familiar, it's easy to underestimate the risks involved. However, falls from ladders are among the most common causes of workplace injuries and can result in serious accidents.

Fortunately, most ladder-related injuries can be prevented by following a few basic safety practices.

Choose the Right Ladder

Not every ladder is appropriate for every job. Before beginning a task, select a ladder that is the correct height and designed to support both the worker and any tools or materials being carried. Using a ladder that is too short often leads employees to stand on the top steps or overreach, increasing the risk of losing balance.

It's also important to consider the work environment. Fiberglass ladders are generally recommended when working near electrical equipment because they do not conduct electricity, while aluminum ladders should never be used around energized electrical sources.

Inspect Before Every Use

A quick inspection before using a ladder can help identify problems that could lead to an accident.

Check for:

- Loose or missing steps
- Cracked rails
- Bent or damaged components
- Worn or missing non-slip feet
- Loose hinges or locking mechanisms
- Oil, grease, or other slippery substances

If a ladder is damaged, remove it from service immediately and report it so it can be repaired or replaced. Never attempt to use a ladder that appears unstable or defective.

Set Up Safely

Place ladders on a firm, level surface whenever possible. Avoid using boxes, pallets, or other objects to gain additional height, as these create unstable working conditions.

For extension ladders used outdoors, follow the manufacturer's instructions for the proper climbing angle and ensure the ladder extends far enough above the landing surface to provide a secure handhold.

Keep the area around the base of the ladder clear of boxes, merchandise, cords, and other trip hazards.

Climb Carefully

Always maintain three points of contact while climbing—either two hands and one foot or two feet and one hand on the ladder at all times. Carry tools in a tool belt or hoist them separately instead of climbing while holding objects in your hands.

Never stand on the top step of a stepladder unless it is specifically designed for that purpose. If you cannot comfortably reach your work area, climb down and reposition the ladder rather than leaning or stretching to the side. Overreaching is one of the leading causes of ladder falls.

OSHA CORNER

Please visit the following address on the web to download helpful safety posters, guides and pamphlets for a safer workplace.

https://www.osha.gov/publications

State of California
CAL OSHA
Department of Industrial Relations

Tasks: Enhance your employee management

Continued from page 4

Popular Task Tracking Tools

Microsoft Planner

For businesses already using Microsoft 365, Microsoft Planner offers an easy way to organize work without purchasing additional software. Tasks are displayed on visual boards where employees can move assignments from "To Do" to "In Progress" and "Completed."

Planner integrates with Microsoft Teams, Outlook, and SharePoint, making it especially useful for office environments where employees already use Microsoft products every day.

Administrative teams can use Planner to manage projects, employee onboarding, recurring monthly tasks, or event planning.

Trello

Trello is one of the easiest project management tools to learn. Its visual board-and-card system makes it simple to organize projects by category or department.

Retail businesses might create boards for:

- Store maintenance
- Seasonal merchandising
- Inventory projects
- Employee training
- Marketing promotions

Office teams can organize administrative projects, vendor contracts, customer follow-up, or document reviews.

Asana

Asana offers more robust project management capabilities while remaining user-friendly. Teams can organize projects using lists, calendars, timelines, or visual boards depending on their preferences.

Managers can assign responsibilities, establish deadlines, monitor workloads, and generate progress reports.

Asana works particularly well for businesses that manage multiple projects simultaneously, such as marketing campaigns, office relocations, product launches, or customer service initiatives.

Monday.com

Monday.com is a highly customizable platform that allows businesses to build workflows specific to their operations. Retail businesses may use it to monitor inventory orders, vendor deliveries, promotional campaigns, or store opening checklists Administrative offices often use Monday.com for HR projects, budgeting tasks, equipment purchasing, or client onboarding. Its dashboards provide managers with a quick overview of ongoing work and project status.

Task Tracking in Retail Environments

Retail businesses often think of task management as something primarily used in offices, but it can be equally valuable on the sales floor.

Daily opening and closing procedures can be converted into digital checklists so managers know every step has been completed.

Weekly inventory counts, merchandising changes, promotional displays, cleaning schedules, and equipment inspections can all be assigned to individual employees with due dates.

Managers can also track employee training, safety inspections, and seasonal preparation projects. Instead of relying solely on verbal instructions, everyone has access to the same information and can update tasks as they are completed.

Task Tracking in Office Settings

Office and administrative teams often juggle numerous ongoing responsibilities. Human resources, accounting, customer service, marketing, and operations all have recurring deadlines that require careful coordination.

Task tracking software helps organize projects ranging from payroll processing and invoice approvals to employee onboarding and annual policy reviews. Rather than searching through lengthy email chains, team members can quickly see project updates, attached documents, and upcoming deadlines in one place.

Managers also gain greater visibility into workloads, making it easier to redistribute assignments when one employee becomes overloaded.

Effective task management is about more than checking boxes—it is about improving communication, increasing accountability, and helping employees work together more efficiently. Whether a business operates a retail store, an office, or a hybrid workplace, task tracking tools provide a clear picture of what needs to be done and who is responsible for doing it.

"The CALIFORNIA MERCHANT" is a published bi-monthly newsletter of The California Merchant Safety Association. Annual subscription is available with membership in the California Merchant Safety Association. For membership information, call (562)446-0013.

POSTMASTER: Send address changes to "California Merchant Safety Association" at 12501 Seal Beach Blvd. Suite 250, Seal Beach, CA 90740.