

THE TECH BEAT | BY JAMES HARDING

Small Business Fun

With the speed and ease of shopping online these days, there's no question that we all have to be engaged in some form of e-commerce. But, that doesn't mean we should abandon our brick-and-mortar stores. In fact, with the right mix of Internet savvy and in-store fun, small, local businesses can run circles around our larger competitors.

Before you read any further, take a second to write down your top five favorite places to shop. You might mention a local electronics store, a clothing outlet — or even The NAMM Show. But, take a minute to ask yourself, “What about these places attracts me?”

If you're like me, you probably wrote down a number of standard answers like “great selection,” “good service,” and “convenient location.” But is that really all there is to it?

I recently hired a trio of interns to work with me in my Louisville, Kentucky, store. My hope was to get a sense of what kinds of things their generation looks for in a brick-and-mortar retail experience. After discussing their favorite places to shop, we took a “customer's tour” through our store — looking at everything as if we'd never seen it before. We even took photographs so we could evaluate our progress more objectively. We recorded every observation — from spiderwebs and power cords to color schemes and product locations. It was a very eye-opening experience.

When the internship ended, I found myself walking around a local mall thinking about what I'd learned and what kinds of things compel me to leave my couch and shop in a physical store. I found myself standing in front of a specialty electronics store when

the answer finally hit me. I go where the fun is.

My favorite places to shop have all the basics. They are clean, offer great service and good prices. But the one unifying thing that sets these businesses apart from all the others is that they encourage me to play in ways I can't online. They offer me complete solutions — built from the kinds of things I might actually want to do in my home. They don't just line up a ton of products and

wait for me to pick one. They show me what products and accessories I need and then show me how much fun having these items can be. Most importantly, they change their feature displays often, highlighting new products in creative ways and tying everything into the fundamental question customers always ask themselves: “Why do I need this?”

Since my interns' visit, I've set up a karaoke station with one of my high-end digital pianos, a good vocal mic, a mic stand and a flat-screen TV to show the lyrics. I've also set up a “teach yourself a song” station with a Disklavier silent player piano, a “Follow the Lights” station with the music from *Frozen* and video game demo featuring one of my interactive digital pianos.

Why not bring an Xbox into your store and host Guitar Hero or Rock Band parties? Or, try a “play along with the band” demo so your clients experience how fun it is to play their instrument in an ensemble environment?

“Big box” retailers and e-commerce portals can't compete with a little, home-grown creativity. Bring “fun” into your store and you will attract the kind of loyal customers that help small businesses thrive despite what the Internet is doing. **MI**

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Don't underestimate the importance of 'fun' in a showroom