

THE RETAIL DOCTOR | BY BILLY CUTHRELL

Don't Change the Experience

I'm lucky enough to live in the south, which means I have access to some of the tastiest vinegar-based, whole-hog, pit-cooked barbecue (or just 'cue as we southerners like to call it). Most people in my neck of the woods consider access to a cooked pig covered under their first amendment rights. I grew up in a small town with two legendary barbecue restaurants within a mile of one another. On one end of town is Pete Jones' Skylight Inn that's now in the third generation of family members' hands



The culture your store offers can mean as much to your customers as the product itself

while in the middle of town is Bum's Restaurant, owned and operated by Latham "Bum" Dennis and his family. Locals can be very loyal to their 'cue restaurants and vice versa, so there are those that dine only at Pete Jones' or Bum's, but never both.

During a recent staff meeting I brought in some plates of 'cue for my staff to taste while I discussed the finer points of this eastern North Carolina delicacy. I started the meeting by telling them about the fierce loyalty of those in my hometown that swore by either Pete Jones' or Bum's restaurants. Being relative newcomers to our area, many of my employees were curious, perplexed really, as to why so many people have such loyalty over our style of barbecue and why so many people in our area will drive hundreds of miles to eat a chopped pork sandwich. I pointed out that not only do these businesses enjoy amazing customer loyalty, many of these establishments have been in the same family, same buildings, on the same plots of land with the same cooks, servers and customers eating there week after week from the same menus for decades. Little, if anything, has changed at these businesses.

My staff had a hard time understanding how these businesses have survived over the years, but I've always known part of their success has always been in the stability of the product and the belief in that product from the people serving it to you. They all agreed the food I brought in for them was delicious, and I encouraged them to make the trip, or pilgrimage as some see it, to these establishments so they can get the first-hand experience

for themselves. Yes, the food is good, but you have to see the buildings, smell the food cooking over hardwood hickory and taste it right off the butcher's block to really appreciate why these places are so revered.

EMPHASIS ON CULTURE

What I wanted my staff to understand was that customers are loyal for many reasons, but overall I believe they come back for your product, your people and the experience you offer them. Your physical buildings can be state-of-the-art, but if your product is not top notch and your staff is not viewed as exceptional, then your million dollar building with millions of dollars in inventory can't save you.

Finally, I wanted my staff to understand that you can always try to update and refine your products and experiences, but sometimes it's best to just leave the core product alone. Once your brand and product is established, take caution in how much you tweak it. Can you imagine the metal band Slayer playing a love song? Or worse, a plate of barbecue served with something other than vinegar-based sauce, cornbread, cole slaw and a Pepsi? **MI**

Billy Cuthrell owns and operates Progressive Music Center. He's a customer service, management and music lessons expert.