

THE RETAIL DOCTOR | BY BILLY CUTHRELL

MI Recon Missions

About once a year I like to spend an afternoon slipping in and out of my competitor's locations. It's a good barometer for me to get the pulse of how they are setting up displays and floor arrangements, structuring their pricing strategies and how their associates interact with customers. I'm convinced nothing tells you the vitals of your rivals better than by actually stepping foot on their home turf.

I guess most would consider my actions bold. Besides taking lots of mental notes of what I experience during my visits, I sometimes take my phone out and snap pictures that I then share with my staff. I guess most of the sales associates that have seen me taking these pictures assume I'm doing price comparisons, yet not a single person has ever questioned why I'm taking photos of their lesson program flyers, brochures, in-store advertisements or any number of non-barcode related offerings.

I have a set "rules of engagement" for my visit. I wear my company shirt that clearly has my company's name on the front and back. I figure this provides some transparency that I work for another music company in the immediate area and, if anyone asks, I will be forthcoming that I am the owner and am just stopping in to check their store out. What's the worst they can do, ask me to leave?

I also visit during what I assume are slower hours, such as the early afternoon on a Monday, so the associates will not be distracted from real customers that are there to make a purchase. I subscribe to the theory of "all's fair in love and war," but let's really be fair here.

A GHOSTLY VISIT

During a recent recon mission to a national big box MI retailer, I had a startling experience. Upon walking through the front door, I discovered no one at the reception desk. After standing there for maybe 30 seconds and surveying the establishment, I decided where I wanted to wander first. I made it past the B&O department where an associate was glued to a computer screen and didn't notice my existence.

I then walked past the pro-audio department where two employees were debating the importance of various lengths of speaker cables. They looked up at me but then went right back to their intense debate. I walked into the drum department and the sales associate was busy putting together a drum set and didn't acknowledge I was there either. I looked over the inventory and checked out a few pairs of sticks that I used to tap on some cymbals while I waited for the guy to offer some sort of greeting, but again I got nothing.

I walked out of the drum department and decided I would visit the lesson department and see if I could get a brochure or talk to someone there. A few lessons were going on but other than that no one was around. I looked in the lesson coordinator's office but not a soul was to be found. I started to feel like a ghost myself and figured if no one could see me I might as well get some good pictures, so I took out my phone and started snapping away. I took photos of how they had their waiting area set up, flyers for upcoming performances and a few pictures of the empty lesson rooms.

Finally a fellow came shuffling from the back and, if I had not spoken up and asked him if he were the person I should see about



Stepping foot into nearby music stores is the best way to measure competition

lesson information, he too would have just walked right past me. I asked if he had a brochure, and he said he was not the lesson coordinator but would find some information for me. He walked in the lesson coordinator's office and pilfered around the desk and found a well-worn brochure. I asked if it had pricing, which it did not, so he tried to explain the lesson price structure. Unfortunately he made it very confusing, or maybe it was just a confusing structure, regardless, if I'm in the business and could not make sense of it, I knew the average customer wouldn't.

I asked when the actual lesson coordinator would be in, and he told me that she was in fact there, but she was taking her break so she was not available. Then said he needed to "take off" because he was technically off for the rest of the day, but if I had any other questions to "call back or see someone on the floor and they would help me."

As I walked back towards the front of the store, I stopped to admire a few guitars, but again no one said anything to me. As I exited the front door a young kid was fiddling with an acoustic bass behind the front desk. I said, "Have a great day" to which he replied without looking up, "Oh yeah bro, you too." I could have had a guitar sticking out of my pants, and he would not have known.

'I'M NOT SURE WHO WORKS HERE.'

Perhaps the oddest thing I encountered during one of my recon missions was at a small retail store that, like my stores, specializes in lessons with a smaller retail footprint. I arrived to find a sign on the door that said, "Closed Today Only" with that day's date written on the bottom of the note. I pulled the door handle and it was clearly locked, but I noticed someone standing inside towards the back of the store. As I turned to walk off, I heard the door unlock and a guy say, "Come on in, we're open." I pointed out the note and he said, "I'm not sure who put that note up there," and then mentioned he had been the only person in the store all day.

I looked around for a few minutes and then asked if my friend Mike still taught guitar lessons there. (In actuality Mike taught guitar for my business a few years back and then took a position at this store because it was less than a block from his new house.) I knew Mike still taught at this store because I had just seen him a week earlier, and he told me he was still there. However, this employee said he was not sure if a person named Mike worked there or not. I thought it odd that he didn't know one of the teacher's names, so I


made up a name and asked, "Does Eddy still teach drums here?" He replied, "I'm not sure." He said people there didn't wear name tags, so he was not sure of anybody's name. I then asked how long he had worked at the shop, and he said about seven or eight months. It was really strange so I left.

I'll be the first to admit my shops do not get it right all the time. We are just as fallible as anyone else. But as I wrapped up my day's recon mission, I was struck with two thoughts: first, if what I en-

countered was the "normal" mode of operations that a customer experiences at my competitors then I have to stay vigilant that my staff stays sharp and is always looking to make our customer visits a positive one. Second, I made sure I got all of our staff name tags for two reasons — it helps customers identify my employees and it allows my desk staff to know who our teachers are. **MI**


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

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