

THE CUSTOMER WHISPERER | BY GREG BILLINGS

# Apples & Ice Cream

Last May, when our economic problems were at their worst and I was seriously wondering how I would generate enough cash to keep my business afloat until fall, I stopped by the Apple Store Genius Bar on the way to work for a quick fix to my MacBook.

Naples, Fla., is a seasonal town, and after Easter, about a third (the wealthiest third) of its population disappears. But at 8:30 on a Tuesday morning, in a mall that doesn't open until 10, there were 25 people in the Apple Store. Three were there for technical help. A few were getting one-on-one instruction. Most were in one of two ongoing group support sessions. Several people were perusing the well-stocked wall of high-priced accessories.

What struck me as odd wasn't just the number of people in the store at that early hour but how happy they were. They were smiling. They were interested. They were involved. In the midst of economic doom and gloom, I'd found an oasis of prosperity. A store full of customers willing to pay full price for everything, willing to purchase added-value service packages and anxious to participate in programs. And these weren't just young people — there was a lot of white hair, too.

My migration to Apple was encouraged by my kids. Since video editing and audio recording became a large part of how I spent my computer time, moving to a Mac made sense. It only took 10 minutes on the Internet to figure out that, as with Bose products, it doesn't matter where you shop: Apple prices are the same everywhere. Maybe it's old age, but I found this oddly reassuring.

At the Genius Bar, I was greeted by a smiling tech who said, "Hi Greg. What's up?" Being recognized by a friendly person, who appears happy to see you, has a powerful effect. And when that person has a genuine interest in helping, the effect is amplified.

The techs at the Genius Bar have a knack for helping confused

customers solve their problems without making them feel stupid. You hear a lot of gentle reassurance at the Genius Bar. It makes you want to come back.

The strangest thing about the Apple Store is its limited selection. It sells a few primary products and a carefully culled group of add-ons and accessories. Still, everything one could want is there. Stranger still: no checkout station or cash register. Staff is casually dressed in color-coded Ts with name cards roped over their necks. Everyone is smiling, everyone is helpful, everyone is knowledgeable and no one looks like a salesperson or clerk. It's a store full of

customer whisperers.

Apple has a transnational strategy of creating a vibe in its retail stores. Most of us can't define vibe, but we know it when we feel it. Wikitionary has a pretty good definition: The atmosphere or aura of a person or place as communicated to and felt by others. Apple's got vibe. Circuit City didn't. And Apple has managed to get vibe on a grand scale.

## TECLA'S SMILE

A cross town, in an alley just far enough off the main streets to be invisible, resides Freddo Gelateria. The tiny reception area seems crowded with even a half-dozen customers. Like the Apple Store, the selection is limited. Mostly, the shop offers whatever flavors the staff made that day, in a cup or cone. No sundaes, floats or shakes. No T-shirts or baseball caps. No candy.

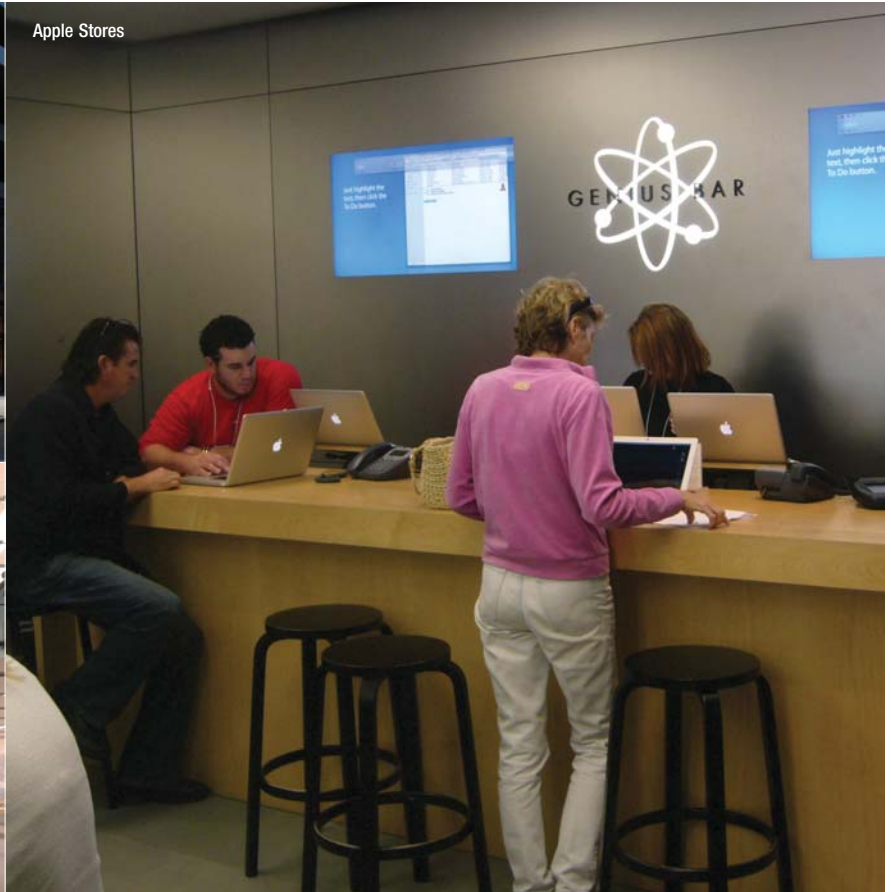
For an ice cream merchant, Naples is the boulevard of broken dreams. Less than a hundred yards from Freddo, on the main highway across from the hospital, is the ghost of the failed Carvel Ice Cream. We used to call Carvel "grumpy-guy ice cream." The owner never smiled, and there were handwritten signs everywhere letting customers know what they shouldn't do. His bad mood may have been caused by the angry talk radio droning in the background.



## What we can learn from the success of the Apple Store and a local gelato shop



Apple Stores



Carvel moved a few blocks away to a location that had housed a failed Baskin-Robbins across from the main city park. Grumpy guy was replaced by a group of sullen goth teenagers. It closed for good about a year later. Sweet Treats, which had a complicated system of blending various candies and nuts into a giant ice cream processing machine, moved into the old Carvel location and closed after one season. Just a few blocks away, in our most chic shopping district, the Naples 5th Avenue Pharmacy, which had come to rely on its ice cream bar to support exorbitant rent, closed a year ago.

One wonders how it could be so difficult to sell ice cream in a town full of tourists, where the temperature rarely dips below 70 degrees. And given the high rate of frozen treat casualties, why would Marco

and Tecla Filardo open Freddo Gelateria at all, let alone in such a challenging location?

But Marco and Tecla sell out almost every flavor, every day. They had to create a mini park with lawn furniture to accommodate guests who couldn't fit in their shop. Their customers come in several times a week and bring friends. A few fans have convinced their favorite restaurants to offer Freddo Gelato. Freddo Gelateria is Naples' most-talked-about secret.

What does Freddo Gelateria have to do with the Apple Store, and why is its business thriving when so many before it, in better venues, failed? The gelato is really fresh and wonderful, but the ice cream at all the other places was good, too, and less-expensive. My guess is that Freddo Gelateria's No. 1 asset is Tecla's smile. And No. 2 is

Marco's engaging personality. If you hang around a while, and almost everyone does, you'll see returning customers greeted like old friends and new customers welcomed as honored guests. Freddo Gelateria has vibe. Baskin-Robbins didn't. Grumpy Guy Ice Cream actually had a bad vibe.

Starbucks has vibe; Dunkin' Donuts doesn't. Barnes and Noble has vibe; Books-A-Million doesn't. Home Depot has vibe; Sears doesn't. Does Guitar Center have vibe? Did Mars Music? Does your store have vibe? Is it a good vibe?

The thing about having a vibe is that it's really easy to do when you're small. And it's pretty easy to do when business is good. You are either smiling at your customers, vendors and staff, and making them feel welcome, or you aren't. It comes from the top

down. That's why vibe is so hard to maintain as a business expands and ages. And that's why vibe is such a powerful competitive advantage when you're the small guy, especially if the big guy is headquartered out of town.

**DENNY'S VIBE**

Which brings us to music stores. A few months ago, my big bass amp died. I unplugged it from the speaker and took it to the music store a few blocks from my house. It's a pretty typical MI store. It's about 5,000 square feet. The windows have been permanently covered with galvanized hurricane shutters, creating the impression of impending disaster. The only outside light comes through the glass door, and it's obscured by several dozen brand decals and faded gig posters, creating the feeling





Top: Freddo Gelateria's Marco and Tecla Filardo; below: Naples Park Music's Cindi and Denny Scott



## 'Having a vibe is really easy to do when you're small ... and business is good.'

ognize me. His staff is very young, poorly trained and constantly turning over.

You wouldn't think that fixing a bass amp would be a big problem for the biggest MI store in town. When I visited shortly after it opened on a Tuesday morning, there were already three customers in the store, none of whom were receiving help. When I told the young lady behind the counter that I needed my bass amp fixed, her first question was, "Where did you buy it?" I was taken aback. It's very different being on the other side of the counter and hearing that question. The implication was that if I hadn't bought it there, I was in trouble. When I told her I'd bought it a long time ago in another city, she fixed her eyes on her computer screen trying to find the manufacturer's Web site, presumably to direct me to another dealer. I struggled to regain her attention by asking if they had an amp tech. When she said "no," I asked what they did when they needed a repair for brand Y or P. She told me they send it back to the manufacturer. Really? They pack and ship amps back to the factory for simple repairs? Bad vibe!

I pass another specialty guitar shop on my way to work. I've also introduced myself to that owner a few times, but he never recognizes me and rarely puts down the phone as he sits behind the counter. His store is more vertical than horizontal,

and most of the basses I've wanted to play were 8-foot up. No one ever helps me get them down. I didn't bother stopping there. No vibe!

It's not like I'm not a customer. I own nine basses; seven amps; three keyboards; two ukes; a classical guitar; an auto-harp; an accordion; a melodica; lots of hand percussion; and more mics, cables, stands and little black boxes than I can count. But I can't get anyone to even say "hi" when I enter either of these music stores. There's also a big chain store 40 minutes away where I can go to be ignored.

Finally, I went to Naples Park Music. When I walked in, Cindi Scott shouted, "Denny, Greg's here with an amp." Denny got up from his workbench and came out to greet me. He asked how I was doin' and about business. He took the amp and said, "That's an old one. I'll get her fixed for you. When do you need it?"

Naples Park Music isn't fancy and isn't much bigger than Freddo Gelateria. They haven't graduated from slat-wall, and the lighting is strictly cool-white fluorescent squares. Denny is proud that he has told most of the major brands to take a hike but more proud of his 10 great teachers and his 200 students. Ask any musician in town about Denny Scott, and they'll smile. Naples Park Music has a vibe, the specialty store has none, and the big store has a bad one.

Denny likes to say he's a survivor, and he has certainly seen his share of competitors come and go. Like Steve Jobs, Marco and Tecla, Denny's got vibe. How about you. Got vibe? **MI**

Greg Billings whispers to customers at the Steinway Piano Gallery in Naples, Fla., and welcomes questions and comments at [greg@steinwaynaples.com](mailto:greg@steinwaynaples.com). Also, join his discussion group at [pianorecoveryplan.org](http://pianorecoveryplan.org).

of a dark cave full of musical instruments. The stage-like track light spots have been replaced with compact fluorescent bulbs — a bizarre effect.

This store has all the major

brands, and its employees have matching logo'd polo shirts. I've introduced myself to the owner a few times, but on the rare occasions when he comes out of his office, he doesn't rec-