

THE CUSTOMER WHISPERER | BY GREG BILLINGS

He's Just Not That Into You

Vendor relationships with music merchants have always been a delicate dance, but never more so than today. There was a time when vendors wooed us. There were steak dinners, elegant parties with ice sculptures and cruises to exotic destinations that didn't include factory tours.

But the declining number of storefronts, increased population of suppliers and presence of alternate distribution channels have changed the game. Now, nurturing vendor relationships is more complicated than ever. Following is a tale of one managed poorly and advice on how you might do better.



A tale of a vendor relationship managed poorly and how you might do better

OF COURSE IT'S PERSONAL

My first play for a major line was like my first crush. We had lots of mutual friends. I had a great location, beautiful store and fantastic sales staff. Plus, I was financially sound. The vendor's dealer was retiring, and I thought we could get the line on the rebound. But like the head cheerleader turning down a band geek, the vendor rejected our proposal and said, "It's not personal."

I was crushed.

Of course, it was personal to me, and it's personal to any dealer in a similar situation. The suits work 9-5 weekdays. They go from company to company and drift in and out of our industry. But for most of us dealers, this isn't a job — it's a life. Our careers are hopelessly enmeshed with our families, our neighbors, our churches and our communities. So yes, it's personal because it matters more to us than it does to them.

Years later, when I was planning my move to Florida, I talked with the head cheerleader again. He might as well have said, "It's not you, it's me." This time, unfazed, I called Bruce Stevens, then president of Steinway & Sons, who was very cordial and welcomed me to the family. Obviously, the cheerleader just didn't get me.

In addition to Bruce, there are many brilliant, dedicated and

fair people on the supply side. Hartley Peavey, Keith Mardak, Dennis Houlihan and Brian Chung come to mind, and there are many more. Of course, each of these fellows had humble beginnings, came up in the industry and know what it takes to win a customer.

Unfortunately, the layer of management in between the president and the sales rep can be filled by people, often outsiders, whose primary objective is keeping their jobs. Their status may depend on looking and acting tough. They must be approached with caution, but they can often be outsmarted. These self-anointed gurus create slick, useless POP materials to impress their bosses and contrive promotional campaigns that more often than not make those of us on the front lines cringe. Nonetheless, they have the power to make our lives miserable and make sure we never get to the big dance without their blessings.

COURTSHIP MATTERS

Looking back, there's much I could have done differently when I went after that major line. I blame my youthful arrogance. A proper courtship would have gone a long way. The popular cheerleader could have been charmed right from

the start with a little flattery. I should have known that if I wanted to end up in the back seat of the car at the drive-in, I'd better start with some flowers and candy.

The top marketing and sales guys at suppliers really do have power and discretion. They decide where marketing money goes, who gets territories and the size of discounts.

They also make the call in gray areas. Over the years, I've had the benefit of getting perks from buddies, and on the flip side, I've been punished — even when it hurt the supplier — because I stepped on the wrong toes. You would think that the harsh realities of the business world would trump eighth-grade playground politics, but occasionally, they don't.

So, don't take it personally. You may be furious at that pompous little weasel right now, but when he's onto his next job, we will still be working in our stores, taking care of our staff and serving our customers. Keep relations cordial, and keep the temperature down. It serves us best in the long run.

In the meantime, this sidebar offers a few strategies that might help if you find yourself outside of the in-crowd. But the best strategy is to not get into these situations in the first place. Play nice and tell them what they want to hear, all the while sticking to your core values and doing what's best for your business. You will probably outlast the suits and forget their names anyway. And in the rare case when they rise to the top, you'll be better off not being remembered as a troublemaker. **MI**

Greg Billings whispers to customers (and vendors) at the Steinway Piano Gallery in Naples, Fla. He welcomes questions and comments at greg@steinwaynaples.com.

+ EIGHT LINES TO MAKE THEM WANT YOU

1. **"You're so smart and clever."** If you want to get people to do something, guide them into thinking it's their idea. This can be as simple as congratulating them for thinking of it. My dad taught me this trick when I was a kid.
2. **"I was thinking of you the whole time."** If you're doing a good job with a brand, threats notwithstanding, vendors are unlikely to make a change unless they believe they have a better option, in which case they are probably already flirting. Call them on it, and put them on defense.
3. **"I just have to work on me right now."** If you aren't doing a good job with a line, it's probably hurting you more than them because the resources could be better deployed elsewhere. Dump them before they dump you. Taking the initiative away from them may make you more attractive and will at least serve notice to other suppliers that you won't be bullied.
4. **"Yes, dear, whatever makes you happy."** Goofy schemes are usually cooked up by a bunch of so-called experts sitting around a conference table at headquarters. The poor guy you are talking to is probably just following orders, so logical appeals to reason aren't going to be effective and might make things worse. You are unlikely to win a verbal argument, but you can stall and let the boondoggle sink from its own weight.
5. **"Dear John ..."** Make your argument in writing rather than verbally. If you're really steamed, always wait 24 hours, and do a final edit before mailing or clicking "send." Be sure to state your understanding of any unreasonable demands clearly, and always send a copy to the boss. Copying the boss tends to keep everyone honest and gives the poor guy a way to back down without losing face.
6. **"Maybe we should start seeing other people."** Play the field. Today, there are more brands than there are dealers to represent them, so you've got options. Pick the right vendors from the start — not because they're popular or pretty but because they're a good match. This isn't dating. It's marriage.
7. **"You should meet my roommate."** Get a wingman. Figure out who needs to be sucked up to, and assign someone in your organization to suck up. Sometimes, just changing faces can solve the problem.
8. **"Where is this relationship going?"** Just as you can't compromise your core values, neither can they. Don't pick fights you can't win. If you can't sell a particular product at a profit, take a pass, but keep smiling. — **G.B.**

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