

INDEPENDENT RETAIL | BY TED ESCHLIMAN

Are Indies Better?

Independent retailers can find encouragement in the ways we're different from our big-box, chain and online competition. Still, at the risk of debunking unmitigated swagger, let's look at the areas where we're supposed to be better than the big boys, and ask, "Are we really better?"

Lower Employee Turnover. A fresh-faced, chain-store "punk" may not have our veteran staff's knowledge base, but indie music retail attitude can also work to a store's disadvantage. Consider the well-intentioned but overbearing "professional" musician who pushes chronic upgrades on newbies, leading them away from beginner product and often out the door for something cheaper. Nothing against a stab at better quality (or planting a seed for a future trade-in), but the final decision to buy is not ours.

Are veteran staff also a bit too familiar with your store's geography? We once had a senior salesperson scoff, "That idiot customer didn't even know we had an amp room!" Ten years of working in the same space can dull our sensitivity to a new customer's sensory overstimulation. These customers can stare at a mountain of trumpet cases and ask, "Do you sell trumpets?" Don't laugh if this happens. New customers equal growth.

Hometown Panache. As a local store, we can market and brand the home-team vibe, but consider the home-style-cooking pitch at some restaurants. Personally, I don't want home-style cooking; I want restaurant-style cooking. Why would I hypothetically patronize a place for freezer-burned burritos like I'm stuck with at home? Consider the new generation of consumers looking for the golden arches or Starbucks logo in foreign surroundings because they want established brands. The children of two decades ago grew up with wrappers, not greasy spoon joints. We need to keep our stores clean, sanitized, organized and brand-familiar at least

on first-impression if we are to capture customers' hearts.

Localized Store Merchandising. Selling lesser-known goods may produce better margins, but we have to recognize our limitations in the information age. Customers come in far more informed than a decade ago, with online blogs, manufacturer Web sites and hobbyist chat rooms a click away. We still have an edge over cyberspace in practical, personal use of what we sell but only if we

keep in close contact with our customers' needs and earn their trust. That means going to their gigs, recitals, concerts and rehearsals. It also means reading their message boards if we are to know what they really need over what they think they want.

Shorter Pipeline to Manufacturers. I dropped in to meet the manager of our local chain competition last year. During our friendly chat, he confessed that even after five years in the music business, he'd never been to the NAMM show. What an incredible advantage the independent can have coming back from NAMM armed with first-hand experience of the latest and greatest. Sure, customers read about the show online, but that's nothing like hearing how you personally glimpsed the new gizmo Eric Johnson's playing.

While many short-sighted dealers missed Summer NAMM in Austin, Texas, I had the time of my life speaking with product development people, and I firmly believe this will impact what they offer in 2008. Ultimately, it will connect my customers with those who make the goods. We have that power but only if we choose to exercise it.

We do have the power to be better, but only if we are honest with ourselves and don't just talk the game. We have to play it. **MI**

Ted Eschliman is an industry veteran of 27 years and co-owns Lincoln, Neb.-based Dietze Music.



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