

IDEAS



>>> Inside IDEAS

> The Lesson Room Page 36

> The Customer Whisperer Page 38

> The Customer Connection Page 42

INDEPENDENT RETAIL | BY TED ESCHLIMAN

THE NEW EXPECTATIONS

When we think of competitive retail, it's good to step back and examine how music product dealers fit into the bigger picture of consumer spending — how we are like and unlike non-music retail. This is critical in framing our business policies and procedures, and how they fit within the mind of the consumer.

Consider the expectations heaped upon every brick-and-mortar retailer, prime being customer convenience. Our 24/7 culture demands retailers work later hours than 20 years ago. And in a world where purchasing is routinely accomplished in one's underwear at 2 a.m. with a mouse click, we have to offer extreme incentives for those incapable of waiting.

We have to be able to communicate at hyper-speed, too. If you don't offer a store shopping cart online, at minimum you need to be able to interact effectively with your customers through e-mail, not to mention after-hours voicemail. Much of the proud expertise we had exclusively is now available in user groups, online manufacturer PDFs and Web sites.



'The burden of babysitting your customers' kids is now on your store and staff.'

Do you have a "family" store? Can family members sit comfortably during music lessons, with little children entertained with toys and coloring books, or are you inviting (through negligence) these little fingers to wander aimlessly — and destructively —

around your expensive merchandise? Like it or not, the burden of babysitting your customers' kids is now on your store and staff, not the parents.

How about your store's atmosphere? We brag about cleanliness, but are those instrument cases that haven't seen a dust rag in months really going to end up in someone's bedroom? Germ obsession is rampant in our culture. Go to the gym, and witness the virtually manic sanitizer pre- and post-spraydown on the equipment.

Is your store interactive and engaging? Think of the megasports stores, with basketball courts *inside* the shopping theater, bookstore chains that encourage customers to sit and read brand-new books (holding beverages), or consumer electronic stores with video games that run during store hours. Do we invite participation at the music store or spurn it? Do you hide the mouthpieces on your display instruments or place "You break it, you buy it" signs on your pricey wares? A lifeless environment is a deterrent to sales.

The matter of brand loyalty is a double-edged sword. Customers pay a premium price for clothing

with "the label," drive cars that lend prestige, and buy premium health and beauty products, sometimes based on quality but inarguably motivated by brand status. Does your store feature brands that lend immediate credibility? Some retailers argue a couple of the big industry names are unprofitable, but they still bring customers in the door.

Finally, we have to realize that despite our strongest desires, what we sell is a want, not a need. Everybody buys groceries, pays rent or mortgage, and invests in health needs. We presume the musical lifestyle to be essential food for the soul, but among the masses, music will take a second seat to those necessities in the unease of a (perceived) tight economy. We have the paradoxical fortune of selling to customers who want to be musicians. We can't take that for granted because they can also be golfers, boaters or 72-inch flat-screen-TV viewers. We have to continue to offer — and promote — the multiple benefits of the musical lifestyle. Funny how a grocer doesn't need to tell his or her customers they need to eat more. **MI**

Ted Eschliman is a 28-year industry veteran and co-owns Lincoln, Neb.-based Dietze Music.