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INDEPENDENT RETAIL | BY TED ESCHLIMAN

'NET PROFIT

John is a die-hard coupon shopper, but not with paper. He's out of control when it comes to online deals. He'd buy cat food at 75-percent off, even though he doesn't own a cat. After Googling the 30 best prices of EXP75 mandolin strings, he thumps his chest, bragging to his bandmates about how he saved 58 cents. Never mind he lost that "savings" in shipping.

Helen is a busy but devoted single mom. The youngest of her three daughters recently brought home a note from the band teacher. It said her daughter needed a trumpet mute for class, and if she didn't have it by Thursday, her middle school band grade would be docked. Helen loves her local music store, but these seemingly spontaneous needs always come to attention after store hours. This is a busy week, filled with soccer, dance practice and Girl Scouts every night. She could buy the mute online with the click of a mouse from out of state, but she'd like to patronize the local store where she took lessons as a child. She'd gladly pay \$4.25 postage, with gas now at \$4 a gallon. Yet she doesn't think to just pick up the



The benefits of online exposure for local, indie dealers

phone at work, call the store and pay with a credit card. That would be so 20th century.

Mort has been "jonesing" for a Yamaha Disklavier for three years. Just as he compared car insurance quotes and researched cameras on the Internet, he has done plenty of online homework

and now feels informed enough to spring for a digital. Having had bad experiences with pushy car salesmen, he's leery of visiting showrooms but knows he has to touch a product in person to make the best decision.

THE CONVENIENCE FACTOR

A consumer's need for convenience is loud and shrill. Music stores can no longer live by an "If we build it, they will come" Web site mentality. There are too many other ways to shop. Make no mistake, though. I'm not talking about buying cheaper. I'm talking about buying with expedience.

If you're an indie music products dealer, grab a big, black Sharpie and cross off the first paragraph, and I mean literally. Get John out of your business model. If you intend to base your level of service on his profile — the primordial need for cheap — you're vulnerable to dumb down your store below what your customers expect of you. It's simple economics. You can't afford to keep John. If you try, you won't be around for the premium customers that keep you in business.

Look at Helen. She wants to do business with you, but she's

already buying her movie tickets online. She has probably thrown away her *Yellow Pages* phone book and secretly desires for you to meet her halfway. Convenience is a commodity your better customers will pay for. A Spartan online shopping cart of basic accessories is not only profitable but a connecting point between customer visits.

In Mort's case, there's an informed, pre-qualified customer and only one piece missing: a bridge between what he knows he wants and a warm body to sell it to him. If you had a Web site showing pictures and specs, even without pricing, this could be the start of some serious and profitable dialog.

Our industry is mature enough to have online startup cyber-services like Retail Up!, ProActive and TriTech that can set up a store shopping cart with 500 essential SKUs or hundreds of thousands. These products don't even have to be physically sold online. They can make your cyber-pitch a precursor to an in-store sale. **MI**

Ted Eschliman is a 28-year veteran of music retail and co-owner of Dietze Music in Southeast Nebraska. Mel Bay recently published his book, *Getting Into Jazz Mandolin*.