

INDEPENDENT RETAIL | BY TED ESCHLIMAN

The New Retail Culture

As the spouse of a commercial real-estate broker, I've had the privilege of attending two conventions of the International Council of Shopping Centers, a 75,000-plus-member global trade association. It has been an incredible opportunity for me to glimpse broader trends affecting businesses.

The first year I attended, in the late 1990s, membership was anxious about this fledgling "Internet thing." Those that held vast financial and physical investments in brick-and-mortar businesses feared the Web's promise of purchasing ease and immediacy would wreak plunder on their livelihoods.

Two years later, my return visit to the Las Vegas convention revealed a contrasting epiphany of positive confirmation and bold, new directive. Industry research had ultimately revealed that human elements — the primal desire to congregate, to touch and feel product, to be actively affirmed by a seller — were nearly non-existent online. A shopping center could thrive, as long as these "experiential" elements were enhanced and exploited. Smart retail organizations had developed a community feel through events like concerts and art festivals, BBQ contests, and in-store fashion shows.

The consensus since then? The Internet is fertile ground for information, opinion and reconnaissance, but ultimately, buyers prefer the physical elements of an in-store purchase. The most successful retailers were those that could impact their market on both fronts.

THE BARNES & NOBLE MODEL

My family makes weekly visits to the local Barnes & Noble coffee shop. My city-council wife likes to pour over her mounds of municipal paperwork there. I bring a laptop for my own writing, and my 10-year-old daughter has read and reread every Garfield cartoon book, cover to cover. We

routinely share a cup of joe with people we know. It brings to mind my small-town high school days, where even those who weren't into football would congregate at the Friday-night games, more for the social experience than the sport.

That instinctual desire to connect is a powerful pull. Barnes & Noble's café has successfully created a venue for us, and unconsciously, my family buys most of its books and CDs there. Sometimes, we look up items on its Web site beforehand, but we buy at the store because of its established comfort.

DESIGN MAKEOVER

Consider your own dealership's physical elements. Are they conducive to congregating, or can they drive folks out the door — or worse, keep them from coming in at all? This can be as complex as building a recital hall or coffee shop in your showroom, or as simple as offering comfortable stools to sit on to audition instruments. Are your aisles cluttered and littered with barriers to moving around freely, or do "guerrilla" display fixtures provoke claustrophobia?

Do you provide pockets of acoustic privacy so a musician can be at one with a guitar, or is your showroom a sonic zoo? Do your customers visit to hang with other musicians? Are accessories easy to get to, aptly inspected, clearly priced, neatly organized? We shouldn't have to hammer home the importance of cleanliness to our staff, but like the teenager who doesn't see his own bedroom clutter, employees must rise above chronic informality and keep counters and products dust-free.

Many of us accomplish this intuitively, but routinely examining the elements of your store's culture is the best thing you can do for your business and your customers. **MI**

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Store culture should be constantly reevaluated, starting with design elements