

IDEAS

>>> **Inside IDEAS**

Customer Whisperer Page 36

Lesson Room Page 38

Streetwise Selling Page 40

Lessons Learned Page 42

My Turn Page 44

INDEPENDENT RETAIL | BY TED ESCHLIMAN

AFTER THE HOLIDAYS

It's a common household scene on Dec. 25: shredded paper and ribbons, empty cardboard boxes, stacks of articles positioned in varying degrees of wantedness under the tree. It comes with a potpourri of emotions and sentiments, the most universal being a feeling of finality. Good or bad, it's over. The gift exchanging is done. Now what?

Our retail showrooms can be like this. We go through months of preparation, loading our stores with optimal yuletide allure and getting ready for the ramped-up spending that always accompanies the end of the year. Then, it's all over, and we face January's empty coldness and a whole new buy/sell cycle.

In preparing for the Christmas buying season, it's easy to make the perpetually myopic mistake of focusing on rapid-fire, big dollars and not capitalizing on the heightened traffic — a whole new arsenal of customer relationships. Some retailers even arm themselves with a quiver of loss-leader items, simply to increase traffic. It may boost gross sales (yup, giving things away), but does it fill you up with an equally ben-



Holiday marketing should focus on creating long-term customers

eficial increase in gross customers? I would argue that in our specialty industry “loss leader” is more loss than lead.

I suggest that music retailers have a more comprehensive goal in their Christmas marketing, one that primes the pump for first and second quarter sales — *and* beyond. Here is a slightly different set

of ideas that will not only give you December numbers but yield fertile seeds for the next round of customer visits.

Include an incentive to bring customers back. (I got this idea from fellow retailer Todd Skaw of Guitars Etc. in Longmont, Colo.) A 12-month, segmented coupon is a brilliant way to tie the notion of “return” to an actual calendar. A holiday drum set sale, for instance, could be good for a free pair of sticks in May, a half-priced percussion DVD in April and an extra 10-percent off drumheads in September. Document each month's deal on a piece of paper, and you'll cost-effectively induce multiple return visits.

Introduce customers to your permanent, ongoing services. This includes music lessons, warranties, accessories and string-changing clinics. Every instrument purchased should include a postcard or brochure that explains your music lesson program. Unlike big-box competition, dedicated music stores are wired to give optimal warranty service. Clarify for the customer what you will do for his or her guitar in six months (or less) when needs arise.

Create contact lists of people you've never done business with before. In the age of spam, junk mail and aggressive, multichannel marketing, you have a valid case for invading people's privacy with offers that will improve their musical lives. Kick butt *and* take names with your holiday sales. The customers are in your store now, and if you don't get e-mail or snail mail addresses, you can't invite them back.

Work the “wish list” benefits of customers who might remember you as their permanent shopping place. One of my favorite customers was a drummer's mom who visited the store twice a year: before Christmas and her son's birthday. It doesn't get any better, when your employees develop this trusting relationship and demonstrate the capacity to be the favorite go-to resource for gift services.

Keep your eye on the prize. Remember: It's not just the cash in the December register that matters. **MI**

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