

# IDEAS

Inside **IDEAS** > **Streetwise Selling** Page 38 > **The Lesson Room** Page 40 > **The Retail Doctor** Page 42 > **Lessons Learned** Page 44

INDEPENDENT RETAIL | BY TED ESCHLIMAN

## GUEST SERVICE

The word “service” is so cliché. We use it in our ad copy, brag about it on the sales floor, leverage it as the ultimate weapon in a competitive market. We say, “Sure, you can get a better price elsewhere, but with us, you get service.”

The problem is, service doesn’t mean the same thing to everyone. Good advice from sales staff? Doesn’t mean what it did before Google. In stock? Overnight and free shipping have clipped the wings off this advantage. Instead, I encourage fellow retailers to consider the idea of the buying experience. Face it: Pricing can be an even match, but what brings customers back is how they *feel* during the sales episode.

If your prices are reasonably competitive, at best you can expect a customer won’t rule you out for a revisit. If the incident was pleasant, chances are even better for a future sale. In today’s retail, price and speed are commonplace, but *enjoying* the sales transaction is much less frequent.

### THE CRUISE SHIP MODEL

In June, my wife and I had the pleasure of celebrating 25 years



**Focus less on the idea of service, more on the buying experience**

of marriage with a Mediterranean vacation on Norwegian Cruise Line (NCL). The trip was a seven-day lesson in the customer experience, from the other side of the counter.

What left the biggest impression was the conspicuous friendliness of the entire crew. Everyone, from the deckhands

to the captains, had marching orders to say “hello.” No matter the station, everyone was willing and wired to acknowledge, greet and make guests feel as if they were part of something significant. It was continuous but not canned. Unimpeachably sincere. The way cruise life ought to be.

I contacted Amanda Graham, NCL’s public relations manager, about this policy of friendliness.

“Being friendly, personable and guest-service-oriented is one of the requirements to work for Norwegian, regardless of the position,” she said. “Norwegian looks for individuals who are not only experienced and professional in their field but also have a passion for providing excellent service and enjoy being around our guests and making them happy. Guest-service training is a huge part of what our on-board training specialists do. We recently launched a fleet-wide program where over 11,000 people on-board were trained in our guest service standards and culture.

“Everyone in the Norwegian Cruise Line team, whether it’s from deck, engine or hotel, has signed a guest-service promise after going to our guest-service

training, where they commit to providing exceptional service, take pride in their job and provide a memorable cruise vacation for all our guests.”

NCL’s secret appears to be in hiring and constantly training.

### REAL FRIENDLINESS

It was obvious that it was an employee-wide, top-down phenomenon. It should be the same in our stores, too. If we make customers feel welcome, they’ll want to cruise our stores again soon, as well.

We all have varying levels of tolerance on the receiving end of friendliness. We don’t like it to be insincere or cloying. On the giving end, we have to understand “friendly” means being alert and sensitive, but in the retail interaction, it must also strip conventional conversational barriers. But too often, we approach the sales floor as combat — a war for the customer’s money.

Instead of treating the sales floor as a battleship, let’s make it a cruise ship. **MI**

Ted Eschliman is a 30-year veteran of music retail and co-owner of Dietze Music in Southeast Nebraska. Mel Bay published his book, *Getting Into Jazz Mandolin*.