

IDEAS

Inside **IDEAS** > Customer Whisperer Page 38 > From the Trenches Page 40 > Lessons Learned Page 42 > Retail Doctor Page 44 > Lesson Room Page 46

INDEPENDENT RETAIL | BY TED ESCHLIMAN

SMALL-MINDED

Last November, my business partners and I felt compelled to participate in a national Small Business Saturday program. The theme, “Shop Small,” was intended to resonate with the masses on Black Friday weekend, when deep-pocket big-boxes drown out local retailers with \$39 Blu-ray doorbuster deals and Thanksgiving Day newspaper circulars that require a wheelbarrow to get in the door.

It was a noble idea, and I’m never opposed to the local guy tooting his own horn. That said, I’ve also never felt guilt was the best motivator to capture a sale.

I believe small business merchants do themselves a disservice when they rely solely on plucking that home team heartstring. Yes, there’s probably a remnant die-hard, loyal customer fan base, but if we’re truly good enough and they’re in a buying mood, aren’t we already tight with them? It’s likely we’ve already lost the battle with the chronic coupon shoppers, so it’s really the in-betweeners we need to be chasing. The poor-me underdog mentality is unattractive in dating, and it doesn’t fare well in



Don’t think small just because you’re a small retailer

attracting shoppers either.

So what are the components necessary to attract new customers? Obviously, we need to play from our strengths — a carefully chosen, smartly stocked, competitively priced inventory (blah, blah, blah). Then, there’s something patently illusive we call service.

What too often escapes us is a painfully honest look at

what service means. Nobody denies the power of a handful of doorbusters and traffic-building events, but what do you do with customers once they actually show up? How are they treated?

A tangible personal touch ought to be our best foot forward. A small business should be famous for intimacy with the customer, but is your sales staff equipped to meet customers’ needs? It’s the little things that matter. Say a customer asks for a product, and the store is out. Is your answer: 1) We’re out? 2) We’re out; how soon do you need it? 3) We’re out; was there something else like it we might have, and in what circumstances are you needing it?

These three answers illustrate the spectrum of customer service. No. 1 is how a clerk responds, with pedestrian “yes” or “no” answers. Clerks work for big-box operations and shouldn’t work for you. No. 2 is a commonplace salesperson, but No. 3 goes the next step to engage in dialogue and dig to know the customer better. Service isn’t just ringing up sales or answering questions about price or amp wattage. Service is investigative, prescribing

solutions and giving helpful advice that enhances lives. If we aren’t doing this, no matter how “home team” we are, we aren’t any better than a box store.

Of course, we can tip the scales in the wrong direction and be overbearing. We hire musical experts for our team who know the product and customer but get pushy with their own well-meaning advice. We owe it to customers to put the advice out there and let them decide. “The 50-watt would be better for your situation, but if you can only afford the 30-watt, that’s still a good value.”

Technology and multichannel marketing have even blurred the concept of local. Is it town, state, country? Is it money that goes out of town but still gives local citizens a viable livelihood? Is an independently owned franchise local?

We should never let size be an excuse for poor performance in competing for our customers. Small businesses that do are just that. Small. **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*.