

INDEPENDENT RETAIL | BY TED ESCHLIMAN

Rules of Engagement

It's one thing to be threatened by the success of a competitor. It's another to feel vulnerable in the face of exponential change to the very fabric of your business model. I don't think it's too alarmist to declare the battle of the brick-and-mortar retailer against cyberspace is currently at an epic crossroads.

I used to think the physical look of a showroom and the interactive touch and feel of a third-dimensional, human-to-human sales transaction would forever triumph over a sterile online experience, but e-commerce is undeniably evolving. Overnight shipping, instant information, barcode-selling price comparisons and end-user reviews have all put a new level of stress on the prowess of the traditional storefront and its soldiers. Face it: The Internet can now offer better pricing, quicker response and infinitely broader consumer information than ever before. If you aren't sweating this, you're living in a retail cave.



The thread of hope for brick-and-mortar retailing remains the quality of the sales experience. Even when a price is competitive — or better — one can't necessarily “feel good” shopping with a cold mouse or a cell phone. There's a universal absence of social affirmation and peer validation that brick and mortars are naturally equipped to exploit in the sales experience.

MISSION POSSIBLE

Our team needs to be wired for two missions. One, fill the cash register. Ask for the sale. Don't let a customer out the door without some effort to meet his or her musical needs using something available in the store capable of filling it.

Second, employees need to subscribe to the personal objective of making a customer feel better about himself. This can happen on many levels. It can be as simple and non-threatening as small talk on the sales floor about the weather, or it can be as deep as expressing genuine interest in and insight on what the customer intends to create with music. Compliment the stranger's taste in clothing, or celebrate the coolness of that vintage instrument brought in for repair. Remind the parent exasperated by the need to

buy reeds or strings for his child that what he's doing is laudable, that he's perpetuating a musically rich life for the child. Whatever the approach, the goal is to make customers feel better going out the door than they did when they came in.

CONVERSATIONAL PROTOCOL

Here are a few conversational rules of engagement.

1. Every customer should be greeted, not just personally but personally. (No canned, “Can I help you?” or “What's up?”)
2. Ask customers a minimum of two questions about how they plan to use the items they're shopping for.
3. Thank each customer for choosing to come into the store, not just for buying something.
4. Remind customers that they're doing a good thing by participating in the creation of music.

We must hone our employee showroom culture. We have to be grateful that the customer has chosen to do the transaction with our store and not online.

The human touch is the sharpest weapon in a brick-and-mortar retailer's arsenal. We just need to cut with distinction, or our industry will lose the privilege forever. **MI**

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Engaging your customers in conversation earns their trust and their dollars