

IDEAS

Inside **IDEAS** > Lessons Learned Page 28 > From the Trenches Page 30 > The Retail Doctor Page 32 > My Turn Page 34 > The Lesson Room Page 38

INDEPENDENT RETAIL | BY TED ESCHLIMAN

BARF BAG

Employees have varying levels of emotional investment in their work areas. A full-time “career” worker might have more passion for cleanliness and order, inventory fulfillment, and customer care than a part-timer. Still, this isn’t always the case, and it fascinates and confounds me what inspires an employee’s sense of ownership.

As an owner, I’m always trying to foster a sense of personal investment among the troops. Sometimes, I even muse about trying something unconventional to motivate them, including hiring a hypnotist to program a sense of disgust to the sales floor’s ills. The following are the first ills I’d have him address.

Empty hooks. We have a sophisticated software system that tracks inventory replenishment needs, but it’s only as good as the accuracy of a computer count. Store counts go wrong when items are sold under the wrong SKU, transferred from the warehouse incorrectly or stolen. Responsibility for corrections falls on our foot soldiers. We try



to train employees to remember that empty hooks indicate a missing item. If a hypnotist could trigger a feeling of nausea at the site of an open hook, we might have better follow-through from staff. Of course, we’d have to keep barf bags in discreet corners of the store.

Overambitious backstock. The converse is also true with overstock. We let our buyers take advantage of occasional vendor specials, but in today’s lean-and-mean retail battle, turns are everything. Chances are, if the hooks are overflowing and

the bins in back carry more than a 30-day non-seasonal supply, we’ve over-ordered, largely because of inventory inaccuracy. Another clue to investigate: Check for shortages in another branch. Again, I wish overstock made staff physically ill.

Clutter. Counter clutter is tacky, kills productivity and makes customers uncomfortable. It ought to churn employee stomachs, too. Unaddressed trash, such as empty cups and food containers, should never grace the floor. Urp. Barf bag.

Customers not welcomed or attended to. We need to keep a neutral space right inside the door, where folks can acclimate to our showroom before we pounce on them. But beyond that, there’s no defense for a customer not being acknowledged or greeted.

There’s a fine line between being pushy and attentive, and the growing self-service sales culture can be deceiving. It’s seductive to overdo being hands-off with customers. At minimum, we want our patrons to know *we* know they are there. That

won’t happen without a greeting or friendly smile. We also owe it to them to find out why they’re visiting. Ignored bodies in the store should be nauseating.

Idleness. The old saying, “The devil finds work for idle hands,” is true on the sales floor. It also translates into staff obsolescence. If a hypnotist could help instill revulsion to idleness, our stores would be cleaner, more ordered and better stocked. Plus, staff would become self-trained. All of these enhancements manifest in a healthier bottom dollar. A good employee is one who’s self-motivated to *find* work.

Downtime should be a sign that the store is overstaffed, and that ought to get personal at the ground level. It means labor is greater than gross sales — not a recipe for job security. No busy work in the absence of customers? Idle should equal queasy, even without a hypnotist.

Roll out the barf buckets. **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*.