

IDEAS

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INDEPENDENT RETAIL | BY TED ESCHLIMAN

BE BETTER THAN AMAZON

We face an industry wide threat to the turf of the local brick-and-mortar store. The new terrain of sophisticated cyber commerce on Amazon.com can have you wringing your hands in frustration, while trying to compete in pricing with this and other online alternatives, such as eBay, QVC, Craigslist or Yahoo Shopping.

Admit it. Not too long ago, we complacently doubted that the click of a mouse and a two dimensional screen could ever be as satisfying as a one-on-one transaction. We knew we'd lose a few on price, but we'd pat ourselves on the back in naive arrogance that the Internet could never duplicate what our own staff and showroom could offer in the realm of the customer experience. Not true today.

I suggest our security is most fragile if we aren't acutely aware of four specific pillars in the service we offer. None of these have anything to do with price, although that always seems the first visceral vulnerability. These are much more subtle cracks in the retail foundation, and if we don't tighten up and strength-



en these four important retail supports, the brick-and-mortar model runs the risk of crumbling down.

STATUS

A computer "status bar" is an incredibly reassuring tool. I remember loading software in the early 1990s without any indication of how long the download would take. There's nothing more frustrating than not knowing the duration of inconvenience. What makes the wait easier is simply knowing how much longer you'll have to wait.

When we take a special order in-store (or online), we need to systematically employ

several notification stages: 1.) We received your order. 2.) We are processing it. 3.) We expect it in "X" amount of days. 4.) We've shipped your order (or it's available for pickup). If you aren't doing at least three out of the four, you're leaving the customer in angst and in the dark. Amazon is extremely good at updating the order's status. We should be as good, or better.

PRESENTATION

Steve Jobs was resolute about packaging. If you've ever opened an Apple product you know what I mean. Containers are clean, highly aesthetic in design and presented so that you can immediately experience the product. Every step in unboxing is part of a larger drama.

Consumers want boxes that aren't brown and battered, and they certainly don't want their purchases pre-scratched. If you ship an item, look at your packing from the perspective of the recipient. Some of our own savvy vendors even include candy in our orders.

ALGORITHMS

A purchase from Amazon always yields numerous contacts and

post-sale suggestions for other related projects in follow-up emails. Ironically, many are inapt and irrelevant, because each recommendation is only a calculated guess based on narrow purchase data. I can't believe how many times they've proposed items I've already bought from them, even recently. Our staff ought be better than a computer at assessing add-ons during and after the sale.

PEER REVIEW

Today's consumers aren't as keen on experts. A soccer mom is inclined to believe another soccer mom who has experienced a purchased product, because today she's suspicious of industry specialists. People will trust others like themselves first. Cyberstores offer customer reviews, but a salesperson face-to-face, sharing interests, trumps the impersonal online advocate in employing the traditional sales elements of qualify, diagnose, and overcome objection.

Use these four pillars, and you can still be better than Amazon. **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*.