

IDEAS

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INDEPENDENT RETAIL | BY TED ESCHLIMAN

JUST SAY 'YES'

You are handed a sombrero. Someone from the audience yells, “Undertaker!” Another belts out, “Five-year-old’s birthday!” Your fellow thespian pretends to fold tortillas and starts singing “Happy Birthday” in Spanish, and the next line is yours. React. Create. Propel the story.

If you’ve ever enjoyed watching a professional improvisational comedy troupe like Chicago’s Second City perform or TV’s “Whose Line Is It Anyway?,” you’ve seen this in action. Audience members are invited to suggest characters and scenarios, and using random stage props (and no script) the actors spin knee-slapping hilarity over the next several minutes. The entire narrative is built upon reaction. Each step of the way, every block of creative input is an affirmation of the previous line — what’s known in the biz as “Yes, and ...”

YES you are folding tortillas, AND my response is to build off your action: “I’m sorry, we’re out of salsa — I’ll check the hearse.” You continue to shape the story line by bouncing off my reply with some comeback that will



keep things going. Hopefully it will be compelling, too.

KEEP IT GOING

An important consideration is the “Yes” part. The plot fails if at any time the next actor fails to acknowledge the previous element. Even if he misinterprets (the actor thinks the first is washing hands, not folding tortillas), the first actor has to change the story to fit the second response. It’s always a positive, always a trigger to the next reaction. To respond negatively derails and kills the performance. To criticize or complain? Unthinkable.

We ought to operate our business the same way. Continually barraged by changes good and bad in retail, true survivors harbor a “Yes, and...” mentality.

Price competition from online search sites has intensified the struggle to achieve healthy margins even on small goods. Yes, and if we also know what the competition is charging, we can adapt with goods that fetch better margin. We can embrace the same technology to make our inventory more fluid.

BE THE EXPERT

Consumer blogs and social media have replaced the retailer as the first line bearer of new product information and testimonials. Yes, and we can use the same assets to keep on top (or ahead) of what our customers want and need to know about the things we sell. If you’re also spending time reading the magazines, user group forums, Facebook, Twitter and trade magazine resources, you can know not only what customers should get, but the competitive products they should not get.

Online, virtual showrooms have made our brick-and-mortar

stores much more of a postscript than in the past. Yes, and a pre-educated customer is much easier to sell to: more prescription on the sales floor, less “pitch.” Our showrooms have to offer the tactile and auditory environments that remain superior to the Internet shopping experience.

The deeper pockets of big budget chain stores and the economies of scale in mass media and advertising have given them more exposure and a nexus edge. Yes, and we can appreciate they are spreading the word to a broader market, enabling us to exploit the weaknesses of dispassionate bureaucratic efficiency with stealth campaigns, titillating personalized service and focused offerings.

Jazz musicians follow “Yes, and ...” by nature. You won’t see a good sax player stop a solo mid phrase because the piano player played a G7#9 chord instead of a Db7. He will adapt, move on and nurture for the next soloist. Our business approach should be similar. **MI**

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