

# IDEAS

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INDEPENDENT RETAIL | BY TED ESCHLIMAN

## BRICK & MORTAR BATTLES

I have a favorite Eddie Bauer leather bomber jacket I purchased a decade ago. I've worn it with plenty panache, but its distressed condition was failing spouse approval at nicer gatherings, putting me on the hunt for a replacement. I'd returned to Eddie Bauer for one, but they no longer offered it, even online. I kept my eye out at other brick-and-mortars for a comparable non-brand name jacket.

When the Nebraska winter kicked in, my quest became urgent. I decided to go online since I felt I'd exhausted my local options. After affirmation through Amazon customer reviews, I had it in a box at my door in five days, no shipping charge.

Being a local store owner, I like to practice what I preach, and buying high-ticket items on the Internet goes against my grain. Still, this was a lesson learned on how important it is to keep my business competitive in price and the new level of service. Did I mention I got the new jacket in five days? Compared to chain clothing stores, our employees have more resources at our disposal for handling special order requests, but the new retail comes with caveats on two tech-



nological fronts: transparency and urgency.

### TRANSPARENCY

We're inclined to think customer decisions are all about "the deal." Price is important, but most level-headed customers (especially your loyal ones) just want to know they are purchasing within the contextual safety of a "fair" price. The bad news is there is bountiful comparison information for purchasing your goods for outside your store. No secret, often cheaper. They can also get plenty of opinions — as much mis-information as information. The good news is that same re-

connaissance is at your sales staff's fingertips, too. We can't hide the truth and when we try, we lose a customer forever.

We're implementing a new era of in-store "transparency" — a major retail shift for us. At our Web-ready registers we already look up information, and some competitor's pricing in front of the customer, but we're experimenting with a plan equipping key salespeople with the access to store-owned tablets, iPads and Kindles, freeing them to get out and rub elbows with customers. We want the opportunity to know where they are shopping and compare in real-time, maybe take the journey with them.

Some sales crew have already been doing this with their own personal cell phones, but I feel it's the store's responsibility to make this resource available with store Wi-Fi so customers can do so freely, too. They aren't cheap, but it's not necessary everyone has an individual one. We'll go about it slowly, adding a few floor tablets at a time.

### URGENCY

Another technological front is competing with time. When customers find something they

want us to order, we are competing against FedEx overnight, Amazon Prime and the myriad of today's "get it now" options. If we get special orders, we need to keep in mind the hourglass has just turned and the sands of customer patience have immediately started running thin. There's a long path from clerk, manager, purchasing agent, vendor/distributor, and shipping and receiving. We must drastically shorten the distance, and every step in this chain requires a mindset of quick strike and urgency.

Gone are the days of letting orders stack up on a spindle, waiting for volume discount. Sometimes buyers have to forego the extra 5 percent to keep the customer coming back. Treat special orders like hot potatoes — no fingers in the chain get burned.

Ultimately, brick and mortar offers the best sales experience, but we need to visibly demonstrate price competitiveness and product immediacy. We fall off our customers' radar when we don't. **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*.