

IDEAS

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INDEPENDENT RETAIL | BY TED ESCHLIMAN

NOT JUST A SALESMAN

Recently, a friend sent a message on Facebook inquiring about a cheap banjo for her college-aged guitarist son as a birthday present. Though she's not in my close circle, we've played together in the church praise band and our kids attended the same elementary school. She asked my advice on banjos, whether or not a 6-string was a "lame" alternative to the traditional 5-string, and confessed she'd been hunting on eBay.

Assisting was a bit of a challenge due to finding something in the mother-of-five's predetermined birthday gift budget (new or used), but I promised I'd check other stores' inventory when I was at work. Though not holding much hope, a serendipitous email from one of my vendors the very next morning with a 25-percent off "moving sale" was priced within her budget.

When I reported my finding to her in text, I got a reply asking if it was superior to the one she'd been scouting on eBay, and included the link. Her response baffled me. Not only was she getting a brand-new, out-of-the box instrument that would be pre-



'Survival means being more than just a salesman.'

checked for shipping damages and defects, she wouldn't have to work with a dispassionate entity or pay shipping charges to the unproven distant New York online store.

She eventually agreed mine was the better deal and committed to the purchase, but qualified it with the post-pitch postscript, "I trust you would answer me as a friend and musician, and not as a salesman." I probably should have taken this at face

value, a compliment, but as a store owner, it concerns me how often purchasing from an independent dealer has become the tertiary alternative to filling a musical need. I've been in the biz for 35 years now, and for my generation, the 21st century tier of trust remains hard to swallow.

CONVINCING TODAY'S CUSTOMER

From my side of the sales counter, we ought to be known for hanging with the education community, offering free in-store clinics and workshops, hiring staff musicians and teachers invested in the local arts, and supporting the symphony in schools, both in spirit and in capital. I'm stumped when we aren't trusted unconditionally or (more than we realize) not even given first chance to help customers with solutions to their musical needs and problems.

I don't mean to be ungrateful. My initial gut reaction was a hair-trigger offense from being doubted. But my larger concern remains the task of convincing customers in the Internet age that we indies are not only relevant, but resourceful.

A decade ago, my wife ran for a local political office, and

she was counseled in the notion of voter consciousness. "What can you do for me?" is the battle cry of relevance, and her three-point "elevator speech" of why one should vote for her as a candidate always needed to include the answer to this important question. It's the same in retail. I'd go a step further and include, "What have you done for me lately?"

Even immersed in all the aforementioned contributions to the local music community, it's still easy to be eclipsed by the myriad of purchasing opportunity resources. We only win when we are relevant through the activities of and cultural contact with our customers both in and outside the store.

I could not have beat a competitive Internet opportunity without that physical, real-time involvement with this customer. It's critical to understand our brick-and-mortar resources are more often the underdog in the fight for consumer choice. Survival means being more than just a salesman. **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*.