

IDEAS

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INDEPENDENT RETAIL | BY TED ESCHLIMAN

SEASON OF IMPRESSIONS

We forget how tiny our engaged but marginal music-making cross section of the population is compared to other professional and hobby industries. Our customers are players, students and people purchasing for players and students. The perpetual challenge of effectively advertising and promoting the store can be daunting for such a small market. The "traditional" media opportunities of print (newspaper, Yellow Pages, billboard, local magazines) and electronic (TV and radio) have been turned on their ear the last two decades, and it's arguably cost prohibitive to embrace these forms en masse like we did in the past.

The most cost effective way to reach out and touch someone is to dig into our database of familiar customers and ask them to return through direct mailing, blogs and special events aimed at them and (hopefully) their friends. Your best foot forward is a happy customer that tells friends and family about happy experiences with you.

The most important way to open up the "family" is to exploit



Make good impressions on first-time customers this holiday season

cycles of search, seasons that outsiders might come into our store and its resources. These seasons are Christmas and Back-to-School. The former has musicians buying more for either their musician friends or family (or themselves), and the latter has someone of influence, a teacher perhaps, freely promoting your store as a resource for what they might need to complete their newfound musical activity (band or orchestra).

This is a smart time to increase the advertising budget, and most of us do, but fair warning — you are about to embark on what should be called a Season of First Impressions. This is when that new person, maybe with the whole family, will step into your store for the very first time and experience your staff, your store layout and — for better or worse — your store culture.

Step back and see your store through newbie eyes. Your staff "lives" there. Like a teenager in her bedroom mess, native clutter and disorganization are invisible. Boxes on the display area may always be gone before day's end, but strangers assume the mess is perpetual. Not only order, you need signage that directs and enlightens. It needs to educate. Don't depend on staff only for these busier times; they won't have the chance.

Include everyone in the conversation. If a family is renting an instrument, talk to the kids. If they feel important during this first encounter, they will want to come back next time for their stepup instrument. They will warmly remember feeling included.

Be a host. We want to get people in and out the door and

move on to the next customer, but you still want everyone feeling complete. If they are new to the store, this is the perfect opportunity to point out the myriad of other activities in the store, such as lessons and repairs. Don't assume folks already know this! You never know when mentioning guitars while renting a clarinet might make Dad reminisce about the garage band he once played in.

Keep the "corners" clean. Did you know health inspectors never look at the center of the floor? They check corners where the wall meets the floor because the only way these stay pristine is if cleaning is systematic and routine. Your restrooms have to be spotless, carpets stain-free and counters devoid of scratches. You can't afford to ignore this.

Invite them back. Never assume a customer will return. Be overt in your desire for them to come back. In the days of point and click, you need to habitually register your appreciation for their presence.

You only make a first impression once. Don't blow it! **MI**

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