

INDEPENDENT RETAIL | BY TED ESCHLIMAN

Combating Old Sins

A grocery van driver cut my neighbor off in traffic, and he curses the name of the company, swearing he will never buy his food there again. A local cement company stencils a website under the logo on its trucks' doors in 1995 (the verge of the Wide Wide Web) and my wife proclaims at the time, she'd never use a concrete company that wastes time on the Internet instead of being out in the streets working. An oboist brings back a reed she claims split after only five minutes of playing and the music store won't give her any kind of replacement or credit her \$8. She vows never to walk through their doors again.



We have funny ways of alienating customers, albeit in manners to which we might be oblivious. Often not our fault, it's these benign actions, or more likely, inactions that haunt us in ways unimaginable. Humans are funny in that we hold different levels of grudges based on our relationships, especially those that are more intense, and that can be somewhat of a double-edged sword of expectation for the independent retailer.

THE PERCEPTION OF ADVOCACY

Our customers expect much more of us than competitive big box retail. When something breaks down they don't dream of marching to a sterile, oxymoronic

customer service counter with unrealistic demands of reparation, but they do with smaller businesses where they benefit from a high level of "advocacy" and assumed satisfaction.

In failure, however, they are slow to forget, and

don't easily forgive. As the old Irish proverb states, "Old sins cast long shadows."

We sell a profoundly personal product. Music making is not only something we are invested in financially, but share with patrons emotionally and spiritually as well. If we run our business right, we offer a visceral experience in the store and promote a continuous and permanent lifestyle.

SUCCESS CHECKLIST

Stock the things our customers expect us to. We assume pressure to stock the latest and greatest. This means tidy displays, a tight replenish organism that plugs holes, and an unrelenting attention and urgency on special orders.

Back up products. A customer comes in with a headstock tuner that broke off after two weeks of playing. Why not eat a \$9 net item to prevent a customer from writing you off for the next several hundred dollars in purchases? Proportionally rare is the customer that scams.

Connect customers with peripheral or "next level" musical experiences. When someone asks about lessons on an instrument you don't offer instruction, do you help them find a teacher? Do you employ resources hooking up musicians with each other or promoting their gigs?

Fully listen to the customer. The customer is always "righter." Sometimes we jump to conclusions not hearing the full message. They have a problem with a purchase, but we don't take the time to empathize their perspective. One verbalizes "used drums," and we hear "used drums." What they really mean are "less expensive drums."

The perception of advocacy is the greatest weapon we have in our arsenal. It rewards us with return business and spreads good will for those who have yet to meet us. In this, our stores can shine. **MI**

Ted Eschliman is a music industry veteran and a co-owner of Dietze Music, based in Lincoln, Nebraska.

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