

Where Do You Go To Find Your Enthusiasm?

On the Friday after Thanksgiving, the Sam Ash Music store near our office was filled with a large and diverse crowd. There were baby-boomers strumming away in the acoustic room, some younger heavy metal fans checking out amps, a few parents obviously buying a “first guitar” for their kid, and a throng of other hard-to-characterize demographics drifting between keyboard, percussion, and recording gear displays. The common denominator among the group was that everyone seemed to be enjoying themselves. It was obvious that for the people in Sam Ash, like everyone else who gathered in music stores across the country, the opportunity to sample, select, and purchase some gear was probably the high point of their week, maybe even month or year.

There’s an oft-quoted article from the *Harvard Business Review* in which “guru” Arthur Levitt urged managers to precisely define the nature of their businesses. To explain his point, he noted that railroad companies were not in the business of running trains, but rather in the transportation business. Apply this analysis to our industry, and we’re not so much in the business of building gear and moving boxes; we’re in the business of providing tools that create personal satisfaction through musical expression. Special emphasis on the “personal satisfaction” component is important.

We all need to keep this in mind in the current economic climate. For retailers and manufacturers, the past 12 months have been dominated by efforts to trim expenses, reduce inventory, and hammer cost structures into alignment with reduced sales volumes. This tough “green eyeshade” cost management is essential for survival, but most of us wouldn’t consider it fun. A day spent arm wrestling with a bank over a reduced credit line, explaining to key suppliers why you’re buying less stuff, or informing staff members that bonuses will be reduced doesn’t put you in the best frame of mind to deliver “personal satisfaction” to your customer base. In fact, it may just put you in such a bad mood, you’ll end up driving people away.

So when business is tough, where do you find the enthusiasm you need to fire up your staff and inspire your customer base? (Customers aren’t coming to you to hear about your business problems; they just want to have fun.) Here’s one straightforward prescription:

attend the NAMM show.

The big confab in Anaheim serves a lot of practical purposes. It’s the best forum for suppliers to showcase their latest and greatest products and outline marketing programs, it gives retailers the opportunity to swap ideas with their peers, and it’s also the site of an unequalled lineup of useful seminars. Just as important, it’s the annual celebration of our industry—a time when we come together to pay tribute to the innovation and craftsmanship that holds the promise of exciting our ultimate customers, and to take pleasure in being part of a select fraternity. Oh yes, it’s also a lot of fun. Think concerts, parties, and friends.



Very few retailers have ever gone to a NAMM show without coming away with a new product or marketing idea that more than paid for the trip. This year dealers can take something away from the show that’s equally valuable: the enthusiasm necessary to inspire customers to buy. From our standpoint, there’s nowhere else to get it.

In 1934, at the absolute nadir of the Great Depression when unemployment topped 25% and there was truly panic in the streets, Raymond Durham, then president of Lyon & Healy, Chicago’s largest retail store, said in the columns of *The Music Trades*, “My salesmen are so down in the dumps, I wish I could ‘buy’ them a sale just to cheer them up and rekindle their enthusiasm.” Think of attending the NAMM show as a more straightforward way of rekindling your enthusiasm.

Leonard Marcus, founder of the Neiman-Marcus department store once observed, “The theater of retail involves giving customers a respite from life’s everyday cares.” It’s hard to do that if you are bringing your concerns to the store. Find the fun in the business again. Go to NAMM. There’s still time.

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