



## EDITORIAL

# Do Consumers Need Protection?

**T**he music products business was generally up last year, and most retailers seem to have posted meaningful gains in sales and profits. Yet for some inexplicable reason, there has been an awful lot of hyperventilation about the sorry state of ethics in business. Piano retailers seem the most seriously exercised on the subject of good conduct, but their counterparts in other segments of the industry seem pretty chagrined as well. On any given day, our mailbox contains a handful of letters in which retailers painstakingly detail the ethical transgressions of their competitors and pine for some bygone day when business was conducted in a more gentlemanly fashion.

The rhetoric varies from letter to letter, but the basic format is pretty standard. A rambling preamble, in which the writer details his sterling character and impeccable reputation, is followed by a paragraph in which regret is expressed about having been forced by events to say something ill of a competitor. Then comes the juicy stuff where the author charges that his competition is thoroughly reprehensible and beneath contempt because: a. they say vile things about me and my store; b. they absolutely give "everything" away, ruining the market for everyone else; c. they lie to customers about how good their products are and how bad our products are; d. they bootleg, selling things they aren't franchised to carry; and e. they advertise cheap stuff and then try to get customers to buy more expensive products! Charges of tax evasion and drug abuse also pop up occasionally.

When reading through these letters, the old adage about "People who live in glass houses shouldn't throw stones," immediately comes to mind. How many of these letter writers can swear to never having said a disparaging word about a competitor, never having overly hyped or excessively slammed a specific product, never having sold a transshipped product? (We won't ask about taxes and drugs.) Some may accuse us of jumping to conclusions, but we think the answer is pretty obvious.

There are some retailers out there who push the

limits of propriety. But the fact is the vast majority of customers are smart enough to see through the hype. Recent events in New York City seem to underscore this. Faced with severe budget problems, the city is trying to cut back wherever possible, and the 255-person Consumer Affairs division is currently under attack.

New York City has more than its share of ethically challenged merchants, but a review of the Consumer Affairs files indicated that vast majority of complaints against retailers were initiated by other retailers, not consumers. In other words, most consumers seem reasonably adept at dealing with low-life retailers. Other retailers are not so adept. Thus they seem to delight in siccing the city government on their less virtuous competitors. Apparently their secret hope is to see their competitors led away in chains or held up to public condemnation.

One hundred and five years of back issues of Music Trades provides ample evidence that the market tends to reward honest, fair-dealing retailers. And we certainly don't condone some of the sleazy tactics we encounter. But all this ranting about unethical behavior seems to be seems to be something of a cop-out. If you're losing sales, it's a lot easier to accuse your competitor of being a slime than making the effort to painstakingly analyze your own failings. Rather than worrying about poor customers falling prey to unscrupulous retailers, we would counsel dealers to worry about maximizing the performance of their own business. Events have shown that the customer is more than capable of taking care of himself.

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