



EDITORIAL

Why Buy Through The Mail?

Why do customers shop from catalogs? Is it the convenience, the competitive prices, the service they receive from telephone sales reps, or perhaps some combination of all three? These questions have preoccupied the industry as competition between mail-order merchants and local operators has intensified in recent years. And with sales tax on mail-order purchases being debated in Congress, the issue has become vitally important to all retailers in the nation.

In commentary in the pages of *Music Trades* and elsewhere, mail-order merchants have portrayed themselves as purveyors of a unique and valuable service, providing merchandise to needy customers who don't have access to quality local stores. Detractors counter that catalog sellers skim the market, using low prices to snatch customers that have been cultivated by local merchants. As with most complex issues, substantial elements of truth are to be found in both positions. A lot of customers swear by the service offered by mail order, and anyone who has worked at retail can remember spending an hour explaining a complex synthesizer to someone who then went and bought it from a catalog to save \$50.

Injecting a new and refreshingly candid opinion into the debate is Ted Veneman, proprietor of Veneman Music of Rockville, Maryland, one of the largest mail-order m.i. retailers in the country. In an introductory letter in the latest issue of the Veneman catalog, he writes, "When I asked everyone here what they wanted most from a mail-order outfit, the overwhelming first response was: the lowest prices. (I knew that already, but I figured it wouldn't hurt to confirm it!)"

In an effort to deliver the lowest prices possible, Veneman also notes that his company has

eliminated its former 30-day unconditional guarantee. He writes, "The way I see it, there are three types of customers in mail-order land: type one (my favorite), the guy or gal who has a clue about what they need and what gear will make them a satisfied customer; type two, someone who is becoming serious, but whose experience factor is a

little low, and who needs some help deciding just what equipment to buy to join the ranks of satisfied customers; type three, those of you who buy gear to use for that special gig or session and then return it afterwards (kind of like a rental, or more like a loaner.)"

For customers who fall into the "type one and type two" categories, Veneman urges them to call his 800 number. For "type three" customers,

he notes, "Buy your stuff from one of those glossy catalogs with their 30-day money back guarantees...keep it long enough to make sure you really like it and that it meets all your requirements; then and only then, send it back to them and order from us. We guarantee to beat any price you paid by 10%, and we will pay for free two-day express delivery anywhere in the United States." While the 30-day unconditional guarantee has been eliminated, Veneman continues to guarantee to replace any defective items returned up to ten days after receipt.

If nothing else, Veneman's approach to generating business illustrates that mail-order retailers defy easy generalizations. Just as some store fronts promote price and others tout service and selection, each of the dozen or so major m.i. catalogs has a distinctive character and style. So, in answer to the original question, "Why do customers buy from catalogs?" the response should be, "It depends on which catalog you're talking about."

Brian T. Majeski
Editor

S.N. Shure, R.I.P.

Perseverance, focus, honesty, modesty, and a commitment to principle. These are universally recognized virtues that everyone talks about. For S.N. Shure, the founder of Shure Brothers Electronics who died last month, they were the beacons by which he charted an extraordinary 70-year career. Shure's life is a uniquely American success story, illustrating how skill, coupled with determination, can overcome nearly any obstacle. Having founded the world's largest microphone company, he has been immortalized by the millions of products around the globe that bear his name. Equally important, his unswerving adherence to the highest standards in business and personal life provide an inspiration for all that follow. A tribute to Shure appears elsewhere in this issue.