



EDITORIAL

SIZE ISN'T EVERYTHING

OVER THE PAST DECADE, "bigger is better" seems to have been the guiding principle for most m.i. retailers. The national chains and countless independents have lavished huge sums on creating beautifully appointed stores of unprecedented scale. It wasn't too long ago that the notion of a 30,000-square-foot m.i. location seemed preposterous. Today, however, 30,000-square-foot (and even larger) stores can readily be found from coast to coast. As amply documented in the columns of *Music Trades*, the shift to ever-bigger locations is one of the most significant trends of the '90s. So, we were a bit surprised on a recent visit to a spectacular superstore chain location.

After 45 minutes of walking through a exquisitely appointed acoustic guitar room, rows and rows of keyboards, an expansive pro sound and recording display, and a percussion room that was about the size of the P.A.S. show, the store manager turned and said, "I try to get each department manager to treat their department as a separate store. Customers seem to want a more intimate atmosphere." "You mean that tremendous size and spectacular displays aren't enough?" we asked. His response was particularly noteworthy. "We sell a lot of product because we have it out on display where customers can see it and touch it. But customers want a one-on-one interaction where they have an ongoing relationship with a salesman who really understands their needs, knows the product, and talks their language. We lose a ton of business to smaller stores because they're just better than we are at the one-on-one."

Over the past few years we've been bombarded with letters and calls from independent retailers worried about being steamrolled by a national chain. So it was something akin to a "man bites dog" story to hear the manager at a national chain location sounding besieged because he couldn't cultivate the one-on-one customer relationships enjoyed by his smaller competitors.

There's no question that substantial inventory,

good merchandising, and an impressive store are necessary ingredients for a successful retail business. The nation's best m.i. stores have these three features in common; however, the chain store manager's admission powerfully indicates that fixtures and merchandising are not enough. There's also a human element that is equally vital for a store's success.

At the turn of the century, when Chicago-based Lyon & Healy operated over 40 stores throughout the Midwest, P.J. Healy, president, told *Music Trades*, "There are no ends of excuses for justifying a poor performance, but the good operator finds ways to succeed against adversity. Industrious self-starters, people who know how to make the sale, are the most important ingredient in our success. Everything else is secondary."

Despite the gulf of almost a century, P.J. Healy and the chain store manager would seem to agree that people remain the most important component in the success of an m.i. store. Music and audio products are complex for the knowledgeable customer and utterly confusing for the inexperienced customer. Add to that the fact that most customers take their music very seriously, and it's a safe bet that m.i. dealerships are not going to go completely "self service" any time soon. So, smaller dealerships and independents should take solace in the fact that they have something to offer that's very difficult for a chain store to match: intimacy and familiarity with the customer. This is not to say that the chains aren't formidable competitors that should be taken seriously, but only that size apparently isn't everything.

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