

Business Lessons Learned At The Mall

By Tim Knox



Normally in this column I dispense highly-intelligent small business advice in response to thought-provoking questions submitted by future and fellow entrepreneurs. This week, however, I have a couple of questions for myself, one of which makes me wonder how truly intelligent I really am.

Q: Dear Me, I recently took my teenage daughter shopping at the mall. The experience raised two questions. (1) What business lessons might be learned from such a foray into teen commerce; and (2) What the heck was I thinking?
-- Sincerely, Me.

A: Dear Me, great questions! Let me answer them in reverse order since the second question is probably the one causing you the most concern.

What was I thinking?

Only the good Lord knows. I vaguely recall complaining that my fifteen-year-old daughter, who we'll call "Chelsea" (because that's her name), didn't spend enough time with her dear old dad anymore.

It's a complaint that every dad of a teenage girl formerly known as "my baby" has made at one time or another. I also recall my insightful wife telling me that if I wanted to spend time with Chelsea now that she was a teenager I would have to do it in her element, which happens to be any large structure with the word "Mall" on the side.

A fitting analogy would be that if you want to spend time with a moody tiger you have to go into the jungle to do it.

No offense to my mall merchant brothers and sisters, but a trip into the deepest jungle is more appealing to me than a trip to the mall. I get no joy out of trudging from store to store, attempting to communicate with salespeople from other planets, browsing discount racks of last season's dollar merchandise and peering into windows at mannequins that seem to be in some sort of inanimate pain (why can't they make a happy mannequin?).

Bottom line: I'm a guy. It is programmed deep within my genetic code to hold such things in high regard. But so strong is my love for my daughter that I pushed my true feelings aside and off we went to the mall last Saturday morning. I called it, "Driving the green mile..."

I was perfectly fine walking through Sears (a real man's store). I held my own when we cruised through Spencer's Gifts (I found the Ozzy Osborne bobble-head doll to be quite life-like), but when we walked into one of those stores that specialize in clothing and accessories for the younger generation my psyche all but shutdown.

Within minutes I found myself standing at the back of the store holding my daughter's purse while she tried on small swatches of material that the store was trying to pass off as clothing.

It was there, standing among the mopey mannequins and teeny-tiny underwear and designer nose rings, that I realized I was witnessing good old American commerce at work.

This leads us back to the first question: are there business lessons to be learned from a trip to the mall? As the young folks would say, "Dude, definitely!"

The following observations can be applied to most businesses, not just to retailers that cater to Generation Why.

Know Thy Customer Well.

Not just from a demographic standpoint, but up close and personal. Even from my limited vantage point behind the rack of neon tube tops it was easy to identify the store's typical customer: young, hip females; ages mid-teens to mid-twenties. They wandered through in groups of twos and threes. I suppose that going to the restroom in public and shopping are the two things females must do in groups. It makes perfect sense when you realize that for teenage girls (and many grown women, I'm told) shopping is a social activity, an excursion to be taken with friends. The smart retailers know this and design their stores to be as much a social hot spot as a retail establishment. From the hip/cool music blaring from the overhead speakers to the hip/cool young sales dudes to the hip/cool posters on the walls to the hip/cool selection of merchandise, this store was a teenage girl's retail heaven on earth.

Target Your Product To A Growing Customer Base.

Teens represent one of the fastest-growing segments of the consumer population, registering a growth of 16.6% between 1990 and 2000. Teens also wield significant buying power - both in their own right and in the context of their family purchasing decisions. Recent studies have shown that teenagers age 15 to 19 spend as much as \$100 per week, much of it on clothing and accessories. That's why this expanding segment of the buying public is increasingly being targeted by smart marketers like Old Navy, The Gap, The Buckle, Pac Sun, and many others. As the old business saw goes, "Sniff for money, then follow your nose."

Provide Great Customer Service.

I've preached this sermon before. Know what your customer expects and always over-deliver. Cater to their whims. Ask their name and use it with respect. Make them feel like your friend, not your meal ticket. Make their experience a good one and they will return.

Good Employees Make All The Difference.

Hire enthusiastic people and train them well. The manager of this store, who looked sixteen but privately professed to be twenty-six, was one of the best salesmen I have ever seen. He dressed like his customers. He spoke their language. He knew their likes and dislikes. He was well-versed on fashion trends. He pointed out things that might be of interest to them and immediately agreed with whatever their opinion was.

"You'd look great in this shirt," he told a giggling gaggle of girls. It didn't seem to matter that he wasn't speaking to any one of them in particular. They all giggled some more and trotted off to the fitting rooms to try on shirts. You could almost hear the cash register ring.

Upsell, Upsell, Upsell.

Millions of dollars have been made by asking one simple question: "Do you want fries with that?" When it came time to checkout the young manager went into upsell mode by saying things like, "That's a great shirt you're buying... we have a really cool pair of shorts to match that! These earrings are on sale. They would look awesome with that necklace you're wearing!"

My daughter giggled and blushed with each compliment – slash - sales pitch and if I had not been the one holding the credit card, she would have bought everything he was selling.

During the ride home Chelsea made the defining comment of the day.

"What a great store! I bet they sell a lot more stuff because of that cute sales guy!"

Business wisdom from the mouths of babes...

I should've had sons.

Here's to your success!

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Small Business Q&A

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