

LEADERSHIP

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How to Maximize Your Retail Sales During the Holidays



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Small businesses don't want to face the ghost of Christmas past during this holiday season. But many realize...



DECEMBER 23, 2010 Small businesses don't want to face the ghost of Christmas past during this holiday season. But many realize it's going to take everything they can throw at customers – from keeping connected via social networking to specialized knowledge to unique products – to generate more sales and compete with big-box retailers in the same town.

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friendly streets of Athens, Ga., home to the University of Georgia, find that being next to other independent business owners can be an advantage. "It's old school, it's old-fashioned that a lot of people are looking for in this day of malls and traffic," says Irvin Alhadeff, who opened Masada Leather 35 years ago.

Shoppers will select small businesses over big-box retailers or major online sites if the shops offer something compelling and provocative, particularly in terms of customer service, says Chris Hanks, director of the University of Georgia's Terry College of Business Entrepreneurship Program.

Often small businesses can't compete with larger retailers on price, but they can be more focused on customer service, he says. Show appreciation for your customers – it could be as simple as carrying purchases to their car. "You've got to be

uniquely distinguished in the mind of your consumer," says Hanks. Ask yourself, "What can I do to make my customers say, 'Wow?'"

[Small business owners in Athens, Georgia](#) share the strategies they're using for snagging shoppers' dollars during the holidays.

Store: Masada Leather, which sells outdoor apparel, footwear, accessories, and handmade belts, wallets, sandals, and more

Holiday sales so far: Up about 5 percent, compared to 2009. "We have a lot more people in the store, but also, people are spending more," Alhadeff says. He estimates his average sale is \$60.

Maximizing sales strategy: He stocks his 4,000-square-foot store with one of the largest selections of apparel and footwear in the region, particularly with the popular Patagonia, Mountain Hardware, and The North Face brands, and footwear such as Ugg. "It's all about having the size and having the colors and having the variety," he says. The store also sends twice-a-week e-mail reminders to customers and has a Facebook page.

Want more tips for getting through the holidays? Check these out:

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He does: Focus on handmade leather items, such as belts, bags, and sandals. "There's just something about that personal touch that I really think separates us from the mass marketers that are out there," he says.

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He doesn't: Go heavy on discounting, except with occasional specials for customers who are friends on Facebook or on the store's e-mail list. "I think that you have to decide what you are. If you specialize in high-end and good quality merchandise and you also try to be a discount store, it's a tough combination," he says.

Store: Rattles and Rhymes, which sells baby furniture and accessories

Holiday sales so far: Down about two percent, compared to 2009, but owner Max Guerrero points out that the first quarter is typically its busiest.

Maximizing sales strategy: Guerrero keeps prices the same as big-box retailers on similar products, but offers more unique toys and items that are at the top for safety and quality within their categories. For example, the store wasn't overly affected during the largest crib recall in history (in 2009), because Guerrero didn't carry many of those manufacturers. "We try to purchase items that we feel meet certain criteria within safety, and a lot of those cribs never did. So they wouldn't have even made it in our door," she says.

She does: Promote new products on Twitter and Facebook, whose updates are automatically posted to the store's website. She shares coupons, such as 20 percent off one item, via e-mail to customers who sign up in the store. The store also partners with local hospitals and lactation consultants to generate awareness in hopes of being the first place moms shop for baby items.

She doesn't: Have strict rules about returns. She says her policy is "pretty lenient," compared to competitors such as Target, which is just down the street.

Store: Frontier, a home and garden gift shop

Holiday sales so far: Sales are on par with last year, but individuals are spending more and buying bigger ticket items, owner Devin Clower says.

Maximizing sales strategy: She utilizes Facebook and her new website to reach out to customers and make them aware of specials; she also offers coupons in local niche publications. Clower has marked down some sections of the store to 15 percent off to encourage customers to buy certain items, such as local pottery.

She does: Play up the fact that she's a local business by selling more and more items by area artists. "Hopefully that means their friends will come in and the money stays even

more local," she says.

She doesn't: Give up in the fight against big-box retailers, which she admits is a struggle. "Downtown (Athens) is so unique, but it's definitely a destination," she says. "You come down here and you want to park and go into several stores."

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