



GREEN MERCHANDISING

ECOSTYLE

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WHETHER potential customers find your business on the Internet or meet you personally, a knack for merchandising is essential to success. The purpose of good merchandising is to stir enticement to buy, which applies especially to retailers. However, wholesalers who provide merchandising savvy reap rewards as well.

If you can't train your staff to merchandise, get someone who will. But first, be sure you and your work team understand your position in the market. You know you represent sustainable living and organic lifestyles, but what is your image? Does your business portray being expensive, cheap, practical, convenient, artistic or inventive? Establish your image before you merchandise or invest in advertising. Even volunteered public relations are far more effective when company image clearly stands out.

Once the staff or consultants know whom they are working for, merchandising skills will fall better into place. Yet that doesn't spell easy. You have to be more than green to attain loyal customers. Create an environment where buying is an enjoyable experience. Key words are *clear* and *easy*. That means customers understand what they are purchasing and don't get frustrated.

Like most things in life, changes are required for survival. Merchants change the way they do business all the time. That changes how they merchandise and appeal to customers. Integrating

services with inventory is a growing trend for both retailers and wholesalers. Some business marriages are surprising, but others are very logical.

Combining an eco boutique with an organic restaurant would have bankers and advisors shaking heads 30 years ago. But persistent entrepreneurs find creative ways to finance their dreams to increase sales. The boutique manager can expand into custom designing and the restaurant can offer catering. Perhaps the next step is a calendar of events. Are those loyal customers ready for designer workshops and cooking classes? The point is to prevent inventory from appearing stagnant and to raise enthusiasm. By merchandising appropriately, you increase sales, often with events.

I once visited a spa where therapists and cosmetologists recorded products they used on each client. The information was swiftly sent to the spa boutique so that the client could buy any or all of the items they liked. The purchase could take place quickly the same day or the client could return or call to buy up to six months later. This particular spa had a private labeling agreement with a manufacturer. Thus the name of the spa was on all the lovely packaging so that each item appeared exclusive. In this scenario, merchandising was a breeze.

Effective merchandising entails point-of-sale props and displays. Let's look at rubber door mats. The manufacturer is aware of the retailer's merchandising needs and therefore offers a display stand, probably at cost. The stand is designed to hold brochures browsers can take and read later. Or anyone can grasp the moment by watching a video that illustrates how the mats are sustainably made from recycled tires. When the manufacturer has your merchandising needs in mind and offers you effective tools, at least half your work is done.

Large stores have the advantage of utilizing point-of-sale techniques simply because there is more display space. They can merchandise by the front door

and on the shelves at the same time. Plus they buy enough items to keep their props filled. Medium sized retailers have the dilemma of stocking by brand or category. There's not always room to do both. Small shops, especially with competition, need to develop their own merchandising style.

Every size store benefits from inventory technology. Knowing your stock, what is moving and what is not enables you to realize what to do and financially motivates you to get it done. If you continually observe your competition and track inventory, you develop a better measuring system to guide you.

Recently, I found a research company that studies emerging global issues to advise their clients of the implications for both corporate strategy and public opinion policy. They conducted a survey that concluded green retailing is heading for a period of consolidation. They claim the shake-up will have a major impact on small green retailers and the manufacturers that sell through them. Reason being that green products are becoming mainstream merchandise. They predict the small business survivors will either merge with big business, go out of business, or strengthen their well-defined clientele whose special needs cannot be met by the bigger companies where customer service is a department. Interestingly, knowledgeable sales people aren't in their survey equation.

Merchandising in the 21st century involves a clear strong image, a fun environment, special services that complement the merchandise for sale, automated inventory, and competition awareness. Mix that up with community involvement, sincerity and kindness that nourish loyal customers and reward your business with increased sales. □

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