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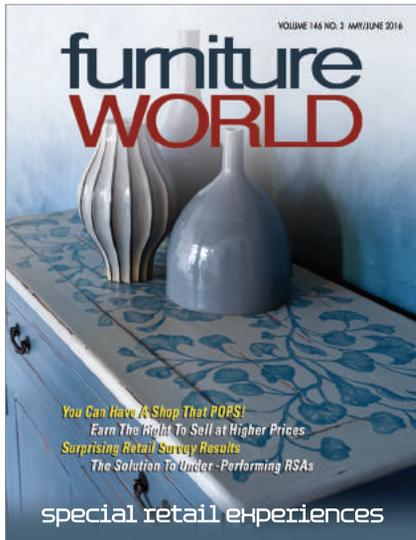
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FURNITURE WORLD MAGAZINE

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COVER: Featured is the Aries Sideboard from Bramble shown in Shale Blue finish with hand painted artwork. Bramble customizes furniture and accessories for every room in the home, offering hundreds of different finish and artwork options. For more information, see page 3 in this issue, or visit www.brambleco.com.

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The day after tomorrow

Only infrequently does it become possible that dramatic changes are forced upon an industry. I'm not thinking about the kind of change that can result from a recession, the invention of a new retail format, or the movement of manufacturing in search of lower costs. I'm thinking about disruptive change, the type that could make furniture factories and retail stores as we know them obsolete; the kind that could do to furniture manufacturers and retailers what the last 20 years of the 19th Century did to cabinet makers.

It's not hard to envision a world where advances in potentially disruptive technologies such as 3D printing and virtual reality combine in a sophisticated way to make local manufacturing the norm, reduce the need for large footprint stores, and usher in style and construction innovations that change the nature of furniture design from largely derivative and evolutionary to revolutionary.

Can you imagine:

...salespeople remotely 'walking' customers through displays in your virtual store using high resolution virtual reality headsets?

...your design staff remotely showing home furnishings to customers, placed exactly as it will appear in their room setting (scanned automatically in great detail including furnishings they plan to keep in their room) to be viewed from any perspective?

...your design engineers purchasing manufacturing specs from vendors who, instead of manufacturing it themselves will work with your local 3D printing 'factory' to manufacture and deliver the goods?

Forward looking companies are keeping track of technologies that may become their reality, tomorrow or maybe the day after.

Russell Bienenstock
Editorial Director

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PETE ROSE

FURNITURE SALESPERSON

by Gordon Hecht

Late Spring is the best part of the baseball season.

Most everyone's favorite teams are still in the race, often due to the performance of veteran players, but sometimes due to *fresh-faced rookies*.

Back in the 1963 season, the Cincinnati Reds featured a new addition to their club. Pete Rose quickly got the nickname "Charlie Hustle" because of his ability to get from home plate to first base, 90 feet, in 4.3 seconds. Back then, a lot of players could do that, but Pete would run that fast... on a WALK!

It takes more than talent and drive to make it to the BIGS, it also takes a lot of luck; being with the right team, no injuries, and good coaching.

WHAT IF PETE ROSE had none of the above? Perhaps an early injury, more interest in playing guitar than second base, or bad coaching? Imagine that instead of wasting 20 plus years playing kids' games, he pursued the noble career of selling furniture and mattresses! You can bet that drive, talent, keen sense, agility, and HUSTLE would still be part of his DNA.

You could be sure that if your store opened at 9 am, Pete would arrive at 8 am. He would get his equipment in order (aka floor samples) including power beds and recliners, know his team's line-up, and check in with his manager for any scouting reports. He would be thoroughly ready for

'today's' game and would stretch out while on deck. When that first shopper arrived, Pete would run the 90 feet from the desk in 4.3 seconds to greet his opportunity!

You probably already know that Pete Rose holds the all-time record for hits. He amassed 4,256 of them in his 23 year career. When interviewed, Rose said part of his success was to focus on the moment. He imagined that each time he came to the plate; it would be his last time EVER! And he didn't want to strike out or pop out. Furniture Salesperson Pete would frame sales presentations the same way. He would treat every UP as his last opportunity of the day, and would perish the thought of it ending as a be-back. In baseball, Pete was known as a Singles Hitter, so while he would swing for the fences, his main goal was to get on base. Furniture Salesperson Pete would show every shopper the newest leather sectionals, bedrooms with armoires, and nine piece dining rooms with china cabinets, but would also sell recliners, lamps, bookcases and even discontinued accessory items. BTW- baseball player Pete also hit a total of 1,041 Home Runs, Doubles, and Triples!

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Pete Rose

FURNITURE SALESPERSON

Furniture Salesperson Pete would sell a lot of \$99 twin mattress sets, \$599 Sofa/Loves, and add in a few bar stools. But he'd sell his share of high end merchandise too!

Baseball Pete ended his career with an on base percentage of close to 40%. That means that he was successful getting on base 15% more than the average player. Baseball Pete knew that he always got three swings at bat. If the first pitch wasn't right, he still had two more chances. Furniture Salesperson Pete would also take three swings, which is; asking for the sale three times. He would close 40% of everyone who walked through the door; no exceptions. Because in baseball, every at bat is counted. Chances are that his closing rate would also be 10-15% more than the REAL average at most furniture stores.

Successful ballplayers think about first place finishes. Furniture Salesperson Pete would think about being first in the store, first to greet, first to sell, and first to follow-up and assess strengths and weaknesses. Baseball Pete played in 17 All-Star Games; and in a demonstration of adaptability, played five different positions in those games! Furniture Salesperson Pete would answer the call to serve at any of your locations, anytime. He would quickly adapt to the new environment and be an All-Star performer in a short period of time.

Baseball Pete Rose was a Home-Town Cincinnati Kid. He graduated High School in Cincy and played his first 11 seasons for the Reds. In the early days of free agency, Pete moved

on to play for the Philadelphia Phillies. He left for more money and a chance to play for a WINNER. Furniture Salesperson Pete would probably be very happy playing for your team. But if there came a day that he felt under-appreciated, under-paid, and no longer playing for a winner, chances are that he would move on to a competitor's team.

At the age of 43 The Phillies told Baseball Pete that he was washed up, too old for the game. He signed on with the now defunct Montreal Expos and was soon traded back to the Reds who made him their player manager. He played part-time and amassed another 200 hits to wrap up his career. "Washed-Up" Pete had three more successful years including getting the all-time record for hits.

A Furniture Salesperson Pete might come to work at your store at ANY age, and be of any gender. Your next Furniture Salesperson Pete may be 18 years old and a year out of school, or over 65 and a year from retirement. HE may be a SHE, and may not dress, look, or speak like you. But Furniture Salesperson Pete will OUT-HUSTLE

the rest of the players on your team and the team down the street. And, will be coachable, flexible, driven, and enthusiastic. Pete will always try to sell your best products, but will take any sale over a be-back. If you are lucky enough to find someone like Pete, treat them right, pay them fairly, and you'll enjoy their long career.

About Gordon Hecht: *Gordon Hecht is a Growth and Development Manager for National Bedding Company's America's Mattress stores, over 400 mostly locally owned and operated bedding stores across the country selling Serta-branded and America's Mattress-branded mattresses. He has been recognized for outstanding sales and management achievement with several organizations including Ashley Furniture HomeStores, Drexel-Heritage, RB Furniture, Reliable Stores, and Sofa Express. He has served as Store Manager, Multi-unit manager and National Director of Sales.*

He is based in Columbus, OH and is married with one adult son. Questions and comments can be directed to him at ghecht@serta.com.

"Furniture Sales Pete

would also take three swings, which is asking for the sale three times. He would close 40% of everyone who walked through the door; no exceptions."



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BEFORE THEY BUY

by Jennie Gilbert

Recent study looks at the costs and benefits of leaving product pricing off of retail furniture store websites.

This is the second of a two-part series on the results of a nationwide survey to understand today's U.S. consumer—specifically, their shopping behaviors and purchasing patterns of durable goods for the home such as furniture. In our March/April issue, we discussed a common misconception among independent furniture retailers: If your store is located in a small town, it's easy to assume everyone knows your business. Nearly 1,800 respondents challenged this conventional wisdom; the results show if you're an independent durable goods retailer in a small market, most of your prospects don't know who you are. Here, we look at another all-too-common misunderstanding among independent retailers: to avoid publishing pricing online.

To publish pricing online or not to publish pricing online—it's one of the most hotly debated discussion points when we talk with independent retailers. Whether we're at trade shows, town halls or through our own small business, my brother Jim and I have spent countless hours coaching retailers on why they can't afford not to be transparent with their pricing.

Understandably, the internet can be

a double-edged sword for the independent retailer. Nine times out of 10, consumers go to the internet first to research products and decide where to shop. So a website that ranks highly on leading search engines can help to neutralize some of the sophisticated marketing efforts by the national chains. But that's not enough.

Just how many sites does the consumer research before they buy? Depending on the durable goods product and price range, our survey turned up some fascinating results. As conventional wisdom would have it, the more a consumer expects to spend, the more research they'll conduct to fully understand their options. What was surprising, however, was the sheer number of sites consumers anticipate browsing!

For example, if consumers expect to spend \$300 to \$500 on furniture, they anticipate visiting an average of four to seven sites to learn about and compare their options. But if they expect to spend \$5,000 or more on a new sofa or other furniture, they plan to visit upwards of 17 websites—that's a lot of online competition for retailers!

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"If consumers expect to pay

\$300 to \$500 on furniture, they anticipate visiting an average of four to seven websites, but if they expect to spend \$5,000 or more, they plan to visit upwards of 17."

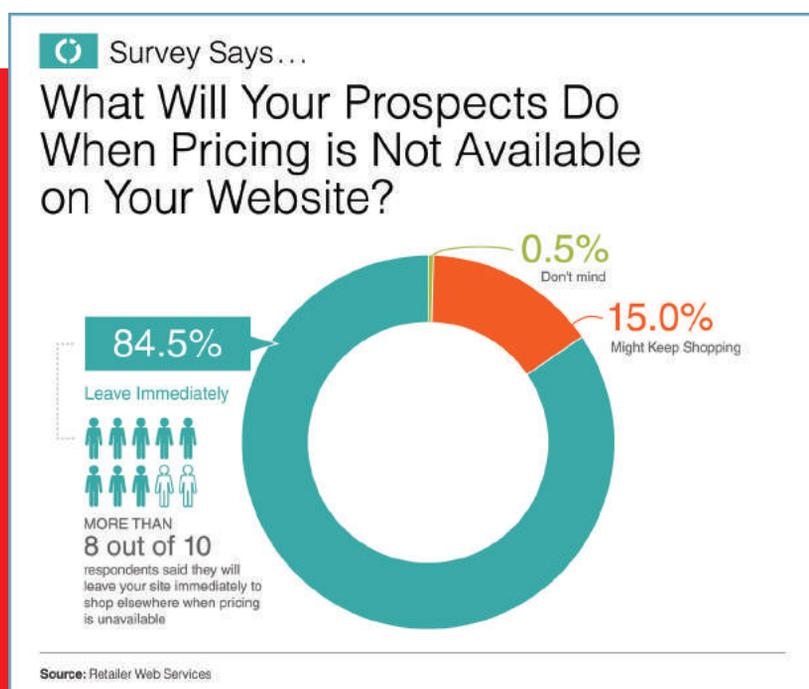
conducting such a large amount of competitive research means your website will be viewed and quickly judged against four to 17 others, on average. To compete and remain in the running, it goes without saying your site must compare favorably to the other sites your prospects are viewing. While there are many characteristics that go into the evaluation of an effective website (with many of them considered subjective), for the purposes of this article, let's look at it from the customer's perspective: What do they expect when they visit a furniture (or other durable goods) store's website?

What do your online customers really expect?

In our national survey, we asked consumers what mattered most to them when visiting a retail website. Almost 100 percent of respondents said the single most important variable in a quality website was their desire for comprehensive product data. As part of that data, nearly 85 percent cared a great deal about sites showing product pricing—though they also indicated that price isn't the only factor that's important in their decision-making process. This runs count-

er to retailers' mis-perception—and worry—that prospects will eliminate their business from consideration if their prices are higher than their competitors. Here are some other common beliefs by retailers as it relates to putting their prices online:

- Some retailers assume withholding online prices will compel customers to visit their brick-and-mortar store, increasing their chance of closing the sale.
- Some worry their competition will use pricing information against them.



"When you withhold pricing information from prospects on your website, instead of leaving you in the running, it makes most prospects dismiss you as a viable option."



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\$500 – \$1,499	7.8 Sites	7.2 Sites	7.6 Sites
\$1,500 – \$2,999	9.8 Sites	9.3 Sites	10.6 Sites
\$5,000 – \$14,999	15.3 Sites	17.4 Sites	N/A

Source: Retailer Web Services

- For many, setting prices and keeping them up to date is hard enough—it's a lot easier to simply not include them on their site.

No doubt, there is persuasive logic at the heart of these arguments. But despite these reasonable assumptions, online consumer behavior shows nearly the opposite: when you withhold pricing information from prospects on your website, instead of leaving you in the running, it makes most prospects dismiss you as a viable option. Instead of luring more curious prospects to your stores to learn pricing, withholding pricing discourages potential prospects from trusting you enough to visit your physical locations.

On the topic of building trust with

consumers, this could make for its own series of articles. But suffice to say, the evolution of the digital age we're living in has put "trust" at a premium with transparency as something consumers have come to expect.

Speaking of consumer expectations, how do they feel when a site they're shopping on does not display prices? The majority of respondents, 85 percent, said they would leave the site and go to a competitor's site that did list prices. What about the remaining 15 percent? Though they might stay on the site, they would be frustrated that the company hadn't shared pricing details. So if they're not leaving your site immediately, you're leaving them with a feeling of frustration. And let's not forget about those four to 17 other sites that are a click or tap away.

"The majority of respondents, 85 percent, said they would leave the site and go to a competitor's site that did list prices. What about the remaining 15 percent?"

Meet your online prospective customers

Our research dug deeper into the demographics of our survey respondents. When asked the same question, "How important is pricing on a retailer's website?" and spliced the data by age, location (population size) and income. Simply put, the grand majority of site visitors leave a site that does not include product pricing no matter where they live, how much money they make or how old they are.

If the data doesn't sway you on this issue, perhaps the voluntary comments of consumers across the country will:

- "I never trust a site that does not display prices." – 61-year-old woman, Memphis, TN
- "I find it shady that a retailer would not disclose prices." – 29-year-old woman, Elgin, IL.
- "...I find that a little sketchy if a seller doesn't display their prices... what are they hiding?" – 23-year-old man, Russellville, AR
- "No prices, no shoppy." – 71-year-old man, Whittier, CA
- "I need to know the prices to make a decision. I would assume everything is priced too high." – 37-year-old woman, Monticello, IN

BEFORE THEY BUY

“If any of this information feels like a bitter pill to swallow, you’re not alone.”

Might your prospects see a higher price on your site and leave for a competitor? Possibly. But without prices, they will almost certainly leave, nine out of 10 times. By not showing prices, your prospects will make the assumption you have something to hide or they can’t afford to shop in your store. Not to mention you can’t put a price tag on losing the consumer trust you have worked so hard to gain.

What this means for
your business (and ours)

While hiding prices may make sense from the retailer’s perspective, the situation is entirely different from the consumer’s perspective. Case in point, 85 percent of our survey respondents told us pricing information is a necessity to keep them on a website. And the 15 percent that might stay without it report they have lost trust in the retailer.

Losing 85 percent of your audience is clearly unacceptable, as is angering or alienating the few that do remain. Showing pricing on your website is absolutely essential to the success of your website and your business.

If any of this information feels like a bitter pill to swallow, you’re not alone. When we first read the results, we were not only surprised by the numbers and strength of consumer sentiment,

we found ourselves with egg on our face. You see, our own website didn’t clearly state the prices of our products and services... because we shared the same concerns mentioned earlier by our retailer clients.

But upon close review of the survey feedback, we decided to take our own medicine: we now publish our own pricing right on our website for our customers, prospects and competitors to see. It wasn’t a bitter pill after all. Our business has only grown because of it.

About Jennie Gilbert: Jennie Gilbert is the Chief Operating Officer of Retailer Web Services, a Scottsdale, Ariz.-based company whose mission is to help independent retailers realize their dreams through the promise of technology. Jennie is a frequent speaker at durable goods retail conferences and the co-author of *RE:THiNK: 11 surprising things you should do now to win retail customers in the digital age* (Retailer Web Services, 2015), available on Amazon and at www.retailerwebservices.com.

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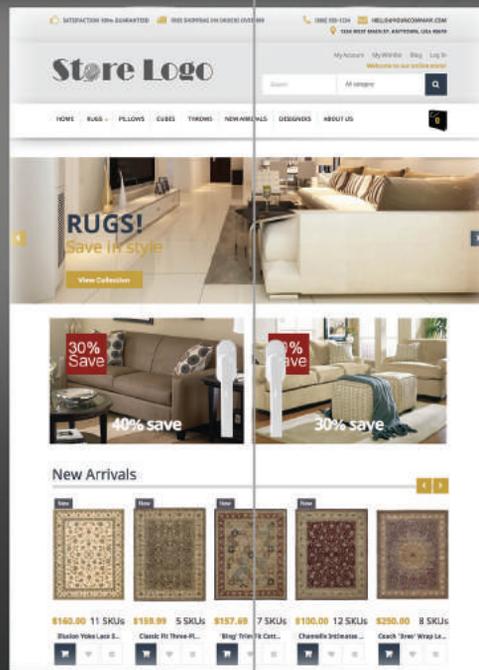


81% OF CONSUMERS
CONDUCT ONLINE RESEARCH BEFORE BUYING*

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SHOP THAT POPS!

Retail Profile of Leon & Lulu: How to transform your furniture store.

by Pam Danziger

Success at retail is less about **WHAT** you sell and more about **HOW** you sell it!

A shop that POPS! is simply irresistible to customers. It's a special destination that engages the customers in such a way to make them feel special too. It magnetically attracts shoppers, made curious about the special experiences and things they will find there. A shop that POPS! keeps its focus on attracting shoppers who have discretionary income and willingness to spend it on the special things they find in the store.

What makes a shop that POPS! so special is that it puts the customer first. It is staffed with energetic, happy people who are knowledgeable, well trained, and make delighting the customers their first priority. It presents a carefully curated range of merchandise and displays it to the delight of the customers. It's a store that consistently presents an image and environment that makes the customers feel they have found a home away from home. It's what every retailer aspires their store to be.

My new book, *Shops that POP! 7 Steps to Extraordinary Retail Success*, shows retailers, large and small, how to make their shop POP! too. It's filled with case studies of stores that work the POP! magic, and presents hundreds of ideas for retailers to put to work immediately in their stores. The most important thing retailers need

to understand is that success in retail today is less about **WHAT** they sell, and more about **HOW** they sell it.

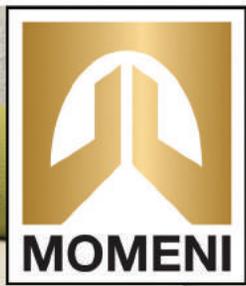
Take the lifestyle and furniture store Leon & Lulu, located in Clawson, Michigan, a Detroit suburb, under the direction of Mary Liz Curtin and her husband and business partner Stephen Scannell. I recently sat down with Mary Liz to understand the secret of Leon & Lulu's success.

Every retailer has their special challenges when it comes to delivering their special POP!, but furniture stores even more so, with their relatively high-priced offerings and the challenge of irregular, infrequent customer

"Shops that POP!
encourage customers
to **touch, feel, taste, try**
on, and participate in
the store in a highly
personal way."

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"Mary Liz's Leon & Lulu shop

doesn't just POP! because they've mastered how to sell furniture.

It is a unique combination of 7 key factors that transform the ordinary store into a shop that POPs!"

purchases. "So many people are terrified about buying furniture," Mary Liz explains. "They will spend \$50,000 on a car that they will be paying on every month for years. But when they come in to buy a sofa for far less money, they have a complete meltdown." The difference, she explains, "Cars are pervasive, we talk about them all the time, but furniture, once you have it, you don't think about it again. Most people buy a car every couple of years, but for a sofa, it may every 7-10 years or longer. They are scared of furniture sales people and they don't really know who to trust."

Leon & Lulu Magic

Leon & Lulu has found the way to overcome fear of furniture buying by getting customers to feel comfortable. They engage customers by addressing each customer's lifestyle and special

needs first, before turning the discussion to the furniture on the sales floor. "We start every interaction with a chat. We ask about their lifestyle, whether they have pets or children, and if they eat dinner on their sofa. We try to understand all those things to guide them to the right fabric, the right pieces, so that we can help them make an informed decision. They become much more confident going through the process."

But Mary Liz's Leon & Lulu shop doesn't just POP! because they've mastered how to sell furniture. It is a unique combination of seven key factors that transform the ordinary store into a shop that POPs!

Here's how Mary Liz Curtin has created the POP! magic at Leon & Lulu:

#1 - Highly Personal

Shops that POP! deliver a shop-

ping environment that fully involves the shopper and engages them interactively in the shopping experience. Shops that POP! encourage customers to touch, feel, taste, try on, and participate in the store in a highly personal way.

Having the right sales staff on the sales floor is key. Each staff member is carefully trained to make a delightful customer experience their first priority. Mary Liz counsels, "Your customer base is the most important asset you have. When a bigger business moves into your space, it is even more important to understand your clientele, know who they are and what they need from you. While we 'indies' cannot compete on price, the relationships we build with our customers, the service we offer and the careful selection of offerings keep us in business. Whatever the size of your business, always think of your customers first. Make their experience with your business as fabulous

"When a bigger business moves into your space, it is even more important to understand your clientele, know who they are and what they need from you." -Mary Liz Curtin



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SHOP THAT POPS!

“We bring all kinds of accessories into these room-like vignettes, try to keep it moving, and make it look like someone really lives there.”

as it can be and they will not want to leave.”

#2 - Shopper Curiosity

Shops that POP! excite consumer curiosity to explore and experience the store fully. It starts with creative shop windows and entrances, followed by imaginative and well-executed visual merchandising. Curiosity lures shoppers into the store and down the aisles to transform a buying trip into a shopping experience.

Leon & Lulu has a leg up in the curiosity department, being located in

a local historic landmark building: a re-purposed roller skating rink. That sets the mood of fun and frolic in the store, which Mary Liz exploits to the max by often having store greeters work in roller skates, serving coffee, popcorn, and on weekends, warm cookies. “So it’s a really fun experience to be here,” she says. “We are in the process of doing an adaptive re-use of a second historic building that was an operating theater from 1941 to 1962. The skating rink and theater were both built in 1941, and they are right next to each other giving us a chance to increase our square footage by about 8,000 square feet. We re-created the theater marquis, a faithful reproduction of the 1941 original which had been removed. The new space will include a café. It’s all part of completing the experience for our customers. We now own the entire entertainment district of Clawson Michigan!”

People driving or walking by are drawn to come inside and satisfy their curiosity. But it goes well beyond the

window displays and front door. “We feature intricate room vignettes that change constantly,” Mary Liz says. “We bring all kinds of accessories into these room-like vignettes, try to keep it moving and make it look like someone really lives there. We also show a lot of color on the floor, which makes it fun. People may order something safer, but they love to see the cheerfulness and excitement.”

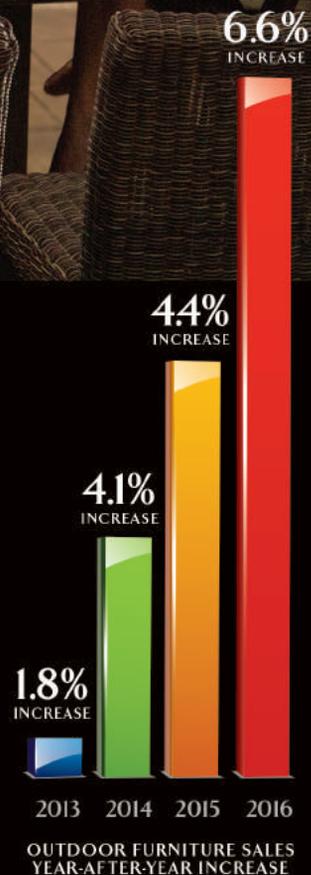
Mary Liz has special advice for furniture stores: Accessorize. She says, “We are accessory heavy. Many furniture stores have the same accessories that

“Leon & Lulu has a leg up in the curiosity department, being located in a local historic landmark building: a re-purposed roller skating rink.”





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“We want our guests to feel at home, so we offer coffee, water, popcorn, sometimes wine. We treat the store like a place where a party is about to happen.”

have been kicking around for years.” Accessories add vibrancy to any room setting, and Leon & Lulu works them for all they are worth. Plus, when times got tough selling furniture back during the Great Recession, the accessories kept the store afloat. “We were lucky to have small things to balance the sales.” But today, those customers who bought the small indulgences and gifts in 2008 are back to buy big-ticket furniture,” she adds.

#3 - Contagious, Electric

Shops that POP! exude energy and excitement that is contagious. It is this quality that makes a shop a dynamic place, exciting to visit, and a thrill to be in.

Energy can’t be dialed in. It must be planned and staged, and the sales staff is its essential spark. “Our staff is always busy, moving things, folding things, doing something so it is an energetic, exciting place to be,” Mary Liz explains. Plus the staff is trained to have talking points ready when a customer comes in, avoiding the dreadful and dreary ‘may I help you?’ introduction.

“We carry lots of vintage and antique items, so it is easy to engage the customers on something interesting, not necessarily what they are here to buy, but it gives us something to talk about before we move into the real business,” she explains.

#4 - Authentic Experience

Shops that POP! present a cohesive vision that combines all the tangible and intangible elements of the store into a unified whole. These elements include atmosphere, store design and merchandise that presents a distinctive point of view that holistically ties together all the disparate elements of the store into one authentic experience.

“Leon and Lulu is a destination store so it has to be worth the trip here,” Mary Liz observes. “And by having so

many product categories, people can shop for their homes, themselves, for friends and special occasions. They have a lot of reasons to come, and plenty of things to keep them busy shopping here for several hours.

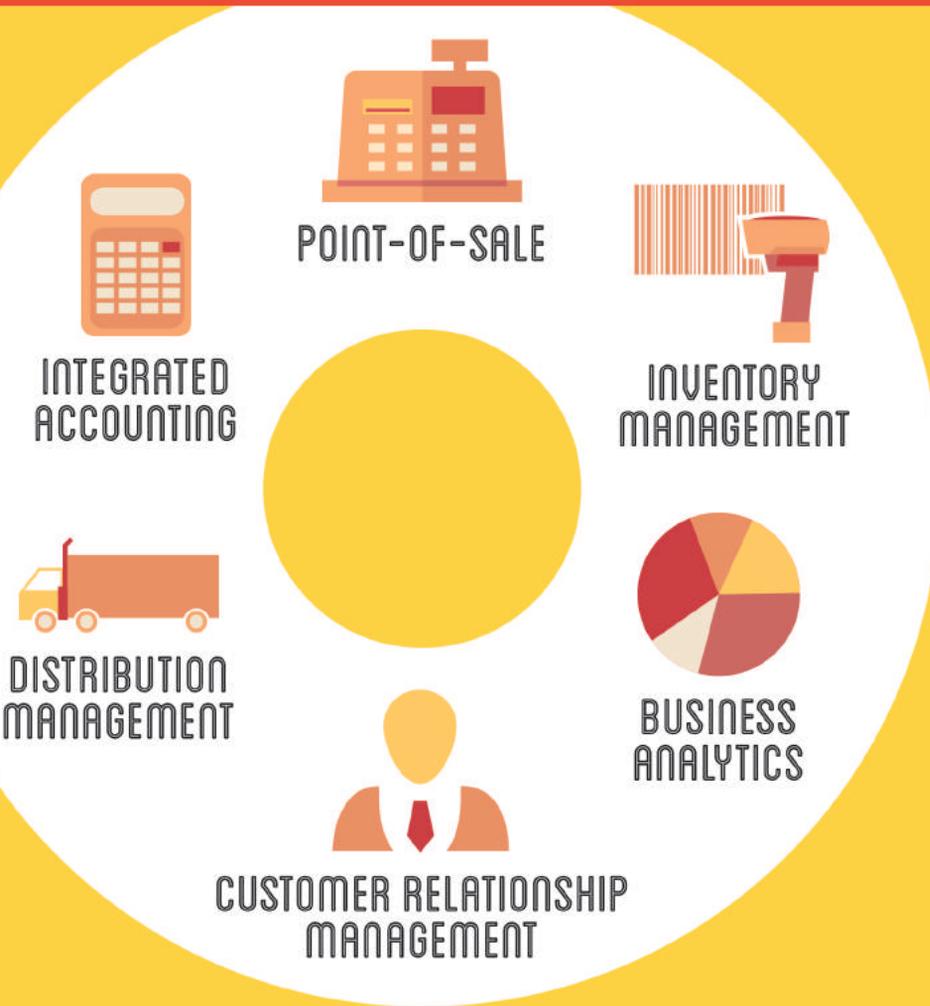
“My husband and I believe in being overstocked at all times. It isn’t a typical retail point of view, but I believe that more stores would be successful if they did that. People want to shop from a full cart.”

“We do about 35-40 percent of our volume in furniture. Being a furniture store that carries housewares, gifts and clothing has been terrific for us. Our regular customers come to us to buy the smaller categories, but when they are ready to purchase a new sofa they already know and love us.

“Last year we had more than 80 special events in this store. Leon and Lulu host an artist’s market four times each year, which is a chance for local artists to show their work. We do a girls’ night out on the first Tuesday of every month, a books and author’s event where about 50 local authors sell their books, dog adoptions, blood drives, and charity events for as many as 400 people.”

Since Leon & Lulu is a home store, they work diligently to make the store home-like too. Every single area in the store must be comfortable. Says Mary

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Leon & Lulu re-created the theater marquis, a faithful reproduction of the 1941 original which had been removed. The new space will add 8,000 square feet and include a café. It's all part of completing the experience for customers.

Liz, "We treat the store like a place where a party is about to happen, a social area where our guests feel comfortable and at home. When we serve in our space we let customers drink red wine and eat. We don't care where they sit because we want them to have a good time and leave happy. That is more important to us than having them leaving with a bag in their hand."

#5 - Conceptually Driven

Shops that POP! are about more than stores selling stuff -- they are conceptually driven and reflect visionary values. The shop transcends being just a store, becoming a place for a new

experience.

"Our goal is to make our customers happy and to provide them with things they need to make their homes better, happier," Mary Liz explains. "So we put them first. If you keep your customer first, her needs and desires in mind, then the money part follows. Our whole driving force is finding things that will serve a need for customers, that they will like or that will amuse them."

#6 - Value Proposition

Shops that POP! have a carefully constructed pricing strategy based

upon offering fair value for a reasonable price. Pricing is not about how low can you go, but how much value can you offer. Pricing, therefore, hinges upon the value to the shopper, not the price tag.

Mary Liz makes delivering value to the customers a priority. "You are always going to have people who come in and say 'that is too much money!' Take notice of it, but also take notice of the quiet ones willing to pay the price and are actually buying," Mary Liz advises. "People today want their money's worth. The customer is better educated and knows more than she ever has. She is willing to pay the money for quality, so she doesn't have

"Our regular customers come to us to buy the smaller categories, but when they are ready to purchase a new sofa they already know and love us."





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Leon & Lulu's carries a wide selection of accessories including wall art, lighting, glassware, table top, and even an area (far right) devoted to products made in Michigan or in the shape of the great state of Michigan!



SHOP THAT POPS!



to replace something in a few months or a year because it breaks. She wants to get a lifetime of value for what she is buying."

That makes communicating the quality and value in the product offerings critical to furniture store success. And that also means having a well-trained and educated staff to communicate those value messages effectively.

#7 - Immediately Accessible

Shops that POP! have all the six preceding qualities, plus another essential feature — they are immediately accessible to everyone, free from pretensions or snobbishness. They know they are good. Rather than resting on their laurels and expecting everybody else to know it too, they constantly reach out, drawing people into their web with missionary zeal and self-effacing charm.

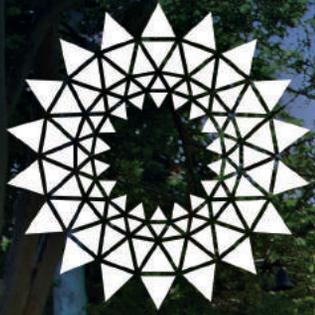
Without a doubt, Leon & Lulu is a super-accessible, non-exclusive des-

tinuation for shoppers totally free from pretensions. That is in the store's DNA. But with such a heavy emphasis on furniture, the price points alone can be off-putting for some shoppers. That's where being a lifestyle store, rather than just a furniture store comes into play. "In a store like ours where we have some pretty pricey stuff, to have a selection of more affordable items, \$1, \$5, or \$10, is important. A lot of people can't afford the \$1,500 mirror, but can leave with a pillow, or a great picture frame. Offering a range of goods at all different prices lets the customer take home a part of the store as a remembrance of the fun she had, at a price point she can afford."

Ultimately success at retail is less about what you sell, and more about how you sell it. And Mary Liz Curtin understands that Her secret is delivering what customers really want in the in-store shopping experience — the personal touch. Mary Liz concludes, "We all are competing with online entities and other competitors offering 'the better deal.' But it is awfully hard to compete with one of our sales peo-

ple saying 'this is the sofa that is perfect for the way you live,' or reassure them that it matches the carpet. That personal interaction is huge." And it is ultimately what makes Leon & Lulu a shop that POPs!

About Pam Danziger: Speaker, author, and market researcher Pamela N. Danziger is internationally recognized for her expertise on the world's most influential consumers: the American Affluent. Her new book, *Shops that POP! 7 Steps to Extraordinary Retail Success*, reveals the secrets to crafting a retail shopping experience that's irresistible to high-value shoppers. As founder of Unity Marketing, Pam leads with research to provide brands with actionable insights into the minds of their most profitable customers. She is the author of five books including a recent mini-book, *What Do HENRY's Want?*, explores the changing face of America's consumer marketplace. Pam is frequently called on to share new insights with audiences and business leaders all over the world. Contact her at pam@unitymarketingonline.com.



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DESIGN



Surya

The Olney lamp's iron base with cut out design accented by an antique silver finish pairs perfectly with a crisp linen shade to create a chic, global look.

Contact information on page 80.



Capel

The Caravan collection is made of 100% olefin. This rug's six patterns conveys great depth and texture. A 5'3" x 7'6" rug may retail for \$399.

Contact information on page 80.



Hooker

Curata is a chic modern collection featuring a mixture of materials and finishes including black nickel, patina brass, stainless brushed brass, white bronze and marble. The 2-piece desk creates a healthy work environment by allowing the consumer to alternate between standing and sitting while working.

Contact information on page 80.



Durham

From the Casata collection of bedroom furniture, this dresser is accented by minimalist nickel or antique bronze hardware. Flowing curves showcase the solid cherry woodgrains.

Contact information on page 80.

Bramble

Gentleman's Chess Table with two drawers and chess set.

Contact information on page 80.



Flexsteel

The Gretchen is a clean transitional styled design with sophisticated French roll arm. Available as a sofa, love seat, chair, and ottoman in custom choice fabric.

Contact information on page 80.



Fashion Bed

The timeless silhouette of the Barrington is enhanced by its unique multi-step finish that creates depth and patina in this turn of the century industrial style bed. The solid center panel in the headboard is accented by an elegant circular design.

Contact information on page 80.

Best Selling

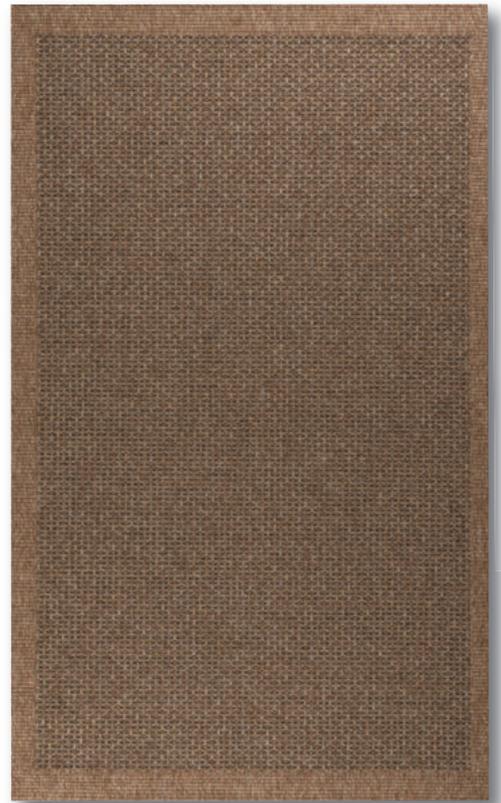
DESIGN



Norwalk

The Sheila Chair is all curves with mid-century modern splay legs. The loose button-tufted back pillow and loose seat cushion provide plenty of comfort. Available in 800 fabrics and 30 wood finishes.

Contact information on page 80.



Tayse Rugs

Largo from the new Serenity collection in Spice. This outdoor or indoor area rug is composed of polypropylene fibers that are softer than jute and have a great natural feel. MSRP for 5'x7' is \$165.00.

Contact information on page 80.



Maxwood

Jackpot!™ Deluxe is a line of classic solid wood youth furniture that is affordably priced and easy to assemble.

Contact information on page 80.



Dimplex

The Reily Media Console is boldly designed with a distinctive black metal base, clean lines throughout and a Grey Cerused finish. Features include dual cabinets for concealed storage, and open concept shelving across the full length of the unit to ensure a place for all things electronic.

Contact information on page 80.



Kas Rugs

Artisan hand-tufted transitional rugs have a multi-textured look and feel. Made in India of wool and viscose.

Contact information on page 80.

West Bros.

The Strada collection combines solid wood construction with a streamlined contemporary look. Made from hand selected White Oak.

Contact information on page 80.



Omnia

The elegant Sydney Sectional, features a hand tufted perimeter enhanced with nail heads. Made in America.

Contact information on page 80.



Best Selling

DESIGN



Momeni

The Lima Collection is machine made in Israel of 100% polypropylene.

Contact information on page 80.



Nourison

Ivory Grey includes a spectrum of neutrals expanding from the nucleus of rich platinum tones into an effusion of taupe rays on a soft ivory ground.

Contact information on page 80.



Arthur W. Brown

With a multitude of standard choices, customers can create a truly personalized wall system for any room.

Contact information on page 80.



Terry Seitz

The Rio with its earthy tones and tufted headboard, features an oatmeal linen fabric with skinny chocolate legs.

Contact information on page 80.



Drexel Heritage

The Fischer Chair with slender shelf arms, tufted back cushion and tapered wood legs.

Contact information on page 80.



Oriental Weavers

The Amelia Collection is machine made in Egypt of 100% polypropylene.

Contact information on page 80.

Jaipur Home

The new Ironwood Wheeled Capsule Sideboard/Cabinet is constructed using a mix of reclaimed and new woods with a metal frame. Intended as a multi-use statement piece.

Contact information on page 80.



Lazarro

Juliette mixes both rounded and rectangular forms highlighted with nailhead trim, used sparingly so that the shapes truly shine.

Contact information on page 80.



POTATO BARN

by Janet Holt-Johnstone

Greg Bongiorno's pockets were empty when he drove into the ancient city of Mesa, Arizona, a few decades ago. "So he just started working and never left," said his son, Mike. "One of his jobs couldn't pay him, so they gave him some furniture instead. Greg sold it, and that's how he got into the furniture business. From 1979 until 2002, Greg owned and ran a few different furniture stores throughout the valley." Greg is now owner of the Potato Barn conglomerate, three eclectic retail stores, at Gilbert, 28,000 square feet; Mesa, 24,000 square feet; Scottsdale, 22,000 square feet and, also at Gilbert, the warehouse/outlet store, 54,000 square feet. And the family just broke ground in Scottsdale for a new location, soon to be built, 42,000 square feet.

Their spirit blossomed when the Bongiornos left Europe. The joy of adventure, of family, of loving interaction. Or maybe the vision had already begun to percolate, "What's beyond that turn in the road, that mountain, that ocean?"

"The family history in America starts with my great grandparents who came over on the boat from Sicily,"

Mike said. "They settled in New York, beginning in the city and slowly moving east to Long Island. Back east is so different from Arizona, the buildings are aged and have history. Greg was born in an area that had a vintage industrial feel. I go back and visit every year, and it really inspires creativity. The city has the old factories and warehouses, and Upstate has the old barns. I think Greg missed that feeling when he came to Arizona and so he tried to recreate it. The house I grew up in and now live in looks like it was plucked up from that area and dropped in our neighborhood in Mesa.

"Grandpa was always in the construction business, and he definitely took a lot of pride in how he designed a project. He was very creative in how he laid out a building floor plan. He enjoyed what he did and it showed in the final product. My Dad used to help out with the construction jobs, but I think he was determined not to get stuck in the family business. (When I was a kid, I said I'd never work in furniture either!)

"Dad really got into music as a kid; growing up in the sixties it was hard not to. That was when he started developing his artistic side. My grandpa told me that Dad always had a

different style. He jokes that the only time he saw him wear a tie was when he used one as a belt!

"Greg kind of wandered around after high school, playing music and traveling the country. The kind of guy that will get in a car and just see where he ends up. And that's how he ended up in Arizona."

Several decades later, Greg's philosophy has the Bongiorno family living an engagingly contagious leveraged lifestyle, time for work, time for relaxation, time for fun. They revel

"Potato Barn
is open four days
a week. And the
Potato Barn
never advertises."
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almost never!



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“After nine years,
in 2011, we left the barn for a store with modern amenities.
Like air conditioning and a parking lot.”

in their vibe, open-handedly offering it to their totally accepting customers. Up front, Potato Barn opens for business four days a week. That’s right, Wednesday through Saturday, 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. Customers know the wait is worth it and adapt their buying schedules to the concepts of their eccentric home furnishings friends. And the Potato Barn never advertises. Never?! Well, almost never.

Mike continues. “It was actually in 2002 that Potato Barn was born. Officially. It was in May of 1979 with a loan of \$1000 and a pickup truck that we started up in our house at Mesa. That loan had to be paid back in 30 days with interest of a new sofa. We went out and purchased five sofas, and were able to pay back the loan.

“Eventually, when we were run out of the neighborhood, we took a 600 square foot location shared with an

auto body shop in town. Moving from location to location gave us our gypsy beginnings.

“In 2002, Dad found an old abandoned building alongside some railroad tracks near the small town of Gilbert, a very unpopulated agricultural area in the south east valley, a little less than 25 miles from Phoenix. In that barn for many years potatoes had been packed, shipped and loaded onto the trains pulled up right next to the building. An old potato barn, so that’s what he called the store. He thought it would be great for a new concept in the furniture business. His idea was ‘to bring in some cool, unique pieces that are affordable’.

“We tried to create a different environment than a typical retail store. We were in an old dusty barn in the middle of a field. It was hot in the summer, cold in the winter and

it leaked every time it rained. With some paint, a little demo and repairs to a very leaky roof, we stocked it with whatever we could find. And the furniture was ‘cool and unique’! Who knew this spot would soon be the fastest growing area in the country?!

“Greg’s inspiration really came from his memories of Upstate New York antique shops and cross country road trips seeing all kinds of vintage chairs, lamps, tables and European antiques in old, restored villages. His idea was to bring this cool vibe of home furnishings from all over the globe to people here in Arizona. The Potato Barn mission is to create a feeling with artistic and unusual pieces that can’t be seen everywhere.

“We’ve always had a laid back approach when it comes to sales, we don’t have any high pressure sales people following you around.



The Scottsdale location and the outlet at Gilbert.



Pictured is the old abandoned building alongside some railroad tracks that became the original Potato Barn location. Below, Mike Bongiorno (left) and Greg Bongiorno at the ground breaking for the latest store location in Scottsdale.



“Everything about our ‘bare bones’ operation is done to keep prices down for our customers. **No commission sales people, no advertising, nothing extra that we would have to build into the retail price.**”

the retail price.

“Also, we truly are a family business. Most of our employees are related to us or are friends of the family. It has made it a great place to work. And to shop at!

“In 2010, my wife, Lindsey, started working for us. She is now one of the buyers and does some of the bookkeeping and accounting. Lindsey

built our first website at home and then helped us get started with social media. Once we began to expand, we had a professional website built.”

Lindsey added, “I actually have no history in furniture or design. I worked at a jewelry store starting in my junior year in high school, and eventually worked my way up to management and buying. After almost 10 years in

We like to let the customers wander the store freely and get inspired by the one-off pieces we carry from all over the world. Our customers are their own salespersons. However, we are more than happy to answer questions and provide assistance when needed.

“Our selection is always changing with a lot of vintage or one-of-a-kind pieces coming in every week. We offer high style and quality for a reasonable price, like a boutique on steroids.

“Our hours and policies are also unique. Being open four days a week allows us to really enjoy personal and family time. It also keeps our prices down by reducing our overhead. It condenses our business and creates a sense of urgency for the customer. Almost like an event, a series of events. This is what we have this week, come back next week to see what’s new. Everything about our ‘bare bones’ operation is done to keep prices down for our customers. No commission sales people, no advertising, nothing extra that we would have to build into



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The Early

jewelry retail I'd had enough of the crazy hours and decided to join Mike at the Potato Barn about a year after we were married. As we grew, it just became a natural transition for me to take over part of the buying. And I can help add a 'female touch' with the accessories and décor I bring in now. And I can't complain about working only four days a week!"

"None of us have had any real formal training in design," Mike reflected. "It's been a learned skill, developed over time. In the beginning Dad sold \$99 dinettes, just like everyone else. In the '80s he manufactured sofas. He was always trying to design something different, even back then. It was in the '90s that we started having estate sales; there were a lot of vintage antiques to sell. During that time, we met a guy who was importing German antiques. We used to bring the containers in, park them in front of our house and sell them in our yard. That was the first taste of vintage for us and it opened our eyes to a totally different style. Since then we have tried to sell what gets us excited, stuff we want to buy for our own homes.

"After nine years, in 2011, we left the barn for a store with modern amenities. Like air conditioning and a parking lot. In 2012, we opened



our second store in Scottsdale. We moved the Scottsdale location twice before we settled at our current location. Our third store is at Mesa; we opened it in 2014 and expanded it a year later. Our outlet/warehouse in Gilbert opened last year and we just expanded it last month.

"And, finally, last week (March, 2016) we finalized our new construction plans for a permanent location in Scottsdale. We are so excited to build a store from the ground up and have a building of our own to show for all the years of hard work we've put into this business."

Family tradition will be in evidence at the Grand Opening. "We do come

from a musical family. My grandpa was a prodigy on the mandolin, at least that's what he told us. My dad has played in bands his whole life. I had a few bands I've played in and actually went to school to learn studio recording. As we speak, my little brother is trying to make it as a musician. His band will probably play at our Grand Opening in Scottsdale. When we left the original barn, we threw a big party, music provided by all of our own bands. So maybe we just use that side of the brain for music and it carries over to the furniture. Most musicians are a little quirky and think outside the box. And we run our business the same way!"

"Our Selection

is always changing with a lot of vintage or one-of-a-kind pieces coming in every week. We offer high style and quality for a reasonable price, like a boutique on steroids."

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RETAIL PROFILE

One doesn't have to dig for humor with the Bongiorno's, it's always there, bubbling to the surface. Said Mike, "One of our early purchases was a five piece dinette that we bought from a Phoenix supplier, put it in the back of our pickup truck and headed back to the house to display our wares. But when we were crossing over the Tempe bridge, we noticed from the rear-view mirror that boxes were flying out and being struck by the cars behind us! Having no choice but to stop and retrieve our battered investment, we picked up the stuffing and bent metal and put it back in the truck. Our first sale was as-is and at a loss. Not all that much has changed!"

Potato Barn's website doesn't conflict with corporate vibes, it reinforces and supports them. A gentle approach defining the Barn's vision, titillating the potential customers' imagination, inviting them to "share" involvement. An invitation to come calling. "We specialize in a wide array of styles from urban industrial and rustic to shabby

chic and vintage. Many items in our collection feature heavily distressed finishes and reclaimed wood. Take a look at our Gallery before you visit to see our style, and then come to our Scottsdale or Gilbert locations to enjoy a hassle-free shopping experience."

The website's Gallery features a huge range of enticing visuals labeled "Rare Rooms", "Fabulous Finds", "Our Shopping Experience" and "Design Details", replete with provocative teasers like, "Choose a theme that spills from one room to the next, or create a unique environment through each doorway". Or, "Sometimes you need just that one item to tie the whole room together. With our unique variety of knick-knacks and centerpieces, one is certain to call out to you by name. Placed in the right room, it will be the talk of your next party, with everyone asking, 'Where DID you find that?!' And, "Who doesn't love the thrill of the hunt?" Cognitive sophistication. Who can possibly resist?

Move forward and you'll find Potato

Barn's policy statements. "No Returns, Exchanges, or Refunds. All Sales Are Final." Customers are encouraged to bring their tape-measures with them, "to bring in samples and pictures from items already in your home before you make your purchase to ensure your new piece has a happy home". Thereby eliminating customer service!

Delivery is referenced, and Mike added, "In the past, when we just had one location, we handled our own deliveries. As we grew, it became more cost effective to use an outside company. Now all our locations use outside delivery companies. Since acquiring a distribution center in 2015, our Potato Barn delivery truck is now used to transport goods to all our locations."

And "no advertising"? Never? Ever? "We have done very limited advertising in the past, just a handful of newspaper ads and one TV commercial in 2005. Since then, we have relied primarily on word of mouth. We've had a Facebook Page for a couple of years,





“The website’s Gallery features a huge range of enticing visuals labeled Rare Rooms, Fabulous Finds, Our Shopping Experience and Design Details, replete with provocative teasers.”

and are just starting Instagram which we think will be a great tool for our business. It’s been hard getting Greg (who does not own a computer, has never used the Internet and still owns a flip phone) on board with e-mail advertising, social media and even a website until recently. We’ll get there eventually!”

Outreach to the surrounding communities also extends Potato Barn’s visibility. “We’ve donated furniture gift certificates to many of our local charities, auctions and schools. And we’ve sponsored some youth sports teams.”

The Bongiorno’s make their presence known at Furniture Markets. “There are four main Markets we attend each year,” Lindsey told us, “two in High

Point and two in Las Vegas. Greg and Mike focus on the larger case goods, containers and upholstery, and I handle all the smaller stuff, accessories, art, rugs, mirrors, lamps. We run around like maniacs at the Markets, just trying to get as much buying in as possible and hope at the end we’ve

made good decisions! Greg and Mike like to be the buying risk takers. I have a more conservative buying style. It keeps things interesting but, in the end, balanced!”

The immediate future of the new Scottsdale store is a great topic of discussion these days. “We do have

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“The new products and ideas that we have for the stores are very exciting, but the concept is the same, **keep bringing in cool stuff and people will get excited.**”

plans to highlight our original barn beginnings with large art pictures that will hang in the store showing where we began. The interior will have exposed aged brick walls and old barn wood. We’re considering a small coffee shop within the store... but we’re not sure yet!”

And down the way? The founder’s perspective involves, “Trying to really establish Potato Barn as a brand”. Greg’s goal “has always been to try and deliver the most affordable lifestyle trends out there in the furniture industry. Now as we’ve grown and developed our own style, we are trying to bring our own designs to the stores. By working directly with the factories we are creating a look that makes us different from other stores. The brand and the concept is always changing, depending on what the industry is doing and what our spin on the trend is. And we know that this concept could do well in other areas. We have always talked about setting up ‘free reign franchise’ stores across the country.

Loose guidelines where the owner can still put their own flair on it. It’s all part of branding the Potato Barn and the lifestyle.”

Mike and Lindsey’s shared point of view, “The future for us is really about the roots. First, we would like to grow some roots and establish some permanent locations. The Potato Barn has ‘changed venues’ a few times over the years. Different locations in different cities, but it was part of the process. We want to be able to call something home and really dial in to what we do. We have accomplished that in Scottsdale.

“The future is also keeping to our roots. Unique, cool and affordable. The past few years have been very experimental for us. We have really tried to come up with our own style by creating what we want to see in the stores. The new products and ideas that we have for the stores are very exciting. But the concept is the same, keep bringing in cool stuff and people will get excited. The home is an extension of our lives, let’s make

it cool. Like our own personal gallery or museum.

“It’s hard to know exactly what the long term future of the Potato Barn is, we’re not exactly sure what we’re doing next month! It’s all about the feel. That’s the thing, there is no perfect formula. But we’re into this stuff, we enjoy it. We want to grow this brand so that we can keep doing what we do, it’s what we know. We were crazy enough to open a store in the middle of nowhere in a broken down barn. We’re crazy enough to keep going. I don’t think we are trying to take over the world, just carve out our little niche and go with it!

“Mesa will be our home for the unforeseeable future and maybe one day we’ll pass down our original house to the next generation.”

It’s all a matter of leveraging.

Editor’s Note: Many thanks to Greg, Mike and Lindsey Bongiorno, writers in residence at the Potato Barn, for their invaluable, insightful and entertaining input!! -JHJ

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HOW MUCH DO RSAs MATTER?

What's the solution to under-performing sales associates?

by David Benbow

"Can you explain why one of my salespersons with clearly superior skills under-performs another salesperson with good but less evident skills?"

This was the question one of my clients asked me the other day, voicing a complaint that I hear all too often. In this particular case, the RSA with premium skills averages about \$8K less in sales per month than her co-worker. My client was worried about how much this problem was unnecessarily costing the store in profits. My quick calculation produced the following answer; at a 48 percent average profit margin, $\$8,000 \text{ per month} \times .48 = \3840 per month in reduced profits. This amounts to about \$46,000 annually (of lost profit), for one sales person, who, when observed in action on the sales floor, appears to have superior sales skills.

Comparing the performance of two or more RSAs should be done very carefully, and probably done on an annualized basis. If you compare day to day, or even month to month, variances may not be as noticeable or significant. If you divide \$8,000 by 30, the average number of days in a month, it comes to a rather modest \$267 per day in missed sales. Doesn't sound like much, does it? Anybody can be short in sales on a given day, due to the breaks. But by the end of the year, the store owner looks at the bottom line and \$46,000 is missing, IN PROFIT. This phenomenon hap-

pens frequently, every day, in thousands of fine stores across this great country. In an ironical twist to this situation, many store owners will move heaven and earth to find a missing \$100 bill when doing the daily recap, but swallow thousands of dollars in lost sales without a whimper.

Now, the paradox is; this under-performing sales person is making \$46,000 per year in commissions and bonuses, which is about what she is costing the company in lost profits. Does it sound like something is wrong with this picture? A very small amount of analysis would show that the under-performing RSA with superior skills could pay for her keep just by matching her less skilled co-worker in sales.

So, what does this have to do with the question posed in the title of this article? Is this RSA worth it, even with her palpable skills? Let's make some observations and see if we can gain some understanding.

Are There Alternatives To Salespeople?

Of course, there are alternatives. In most of the famous big box retailers, who may carry some furniture, but

also sell everything else from tires and lawn fertilizer to wine product and cheese food, they provide price tags, some of which display explanatory labels. They employ well-scattered clerks (not to be confused with salespeople) around the store. In this type of store, the customer looks for the clerk, whereas in furniture stores, the RSA looks for the customer. When you get to the check-out counter, the cashier politely asks if you found everything you were looking for. (Yeah, I found everything but a clerk who could answer my questions.)

One particularly huge retailer, who specializes in Nordic furniture and various miscellaneous home furnishings, operates in a somewhat different fashion from traditional furniture stores. They do not have traditional, commissioned RSAs on the floor; (at least they didn't the last time I visited one of their stores.) To succeed without what I consider to be authentic salespeople, they spend a lot of money on advertising and image and work too attract a lot of shoppers, who shop pretty much as they do in a grocery store. (When I say "authentic salespeople," I mean RSAs who actually make an effort to CLOSE the sale, and who get paid to close sales.)

How do they do it? Why don't furniture stores, big and small, operate this way?

If the above-mentioned stores can operate without highly paid retail sales associates, why can't furniture and mattress stores? I mean, after all, aren't we told that the internet has changed everything we used to think about customers?

Are Customers Really Well Informed Today?

I read a lot these days that customers, thanks to the internet, are SO much better informed than they used to be. If that is so, why do we need Retail Sales Associates?

I worked for many years as an RSA, both before the internet, and after the internet. In my opinion, very often, the internet revolution has converted UNINFORMED customers into MISINFORMED customers.

Even the nation's most famous consumer information reporting magazine is frequently, and rightly, criticized for misinformation by well known mattress and furniture industry voices. If you can't believe the self-appointed consumer information publications, whom can you believe? And, if the famous magazine's information is of questionable value, how much can the customer rely on the widely varying data found on the internet?

Do RSAs Earn Their Money?

They're supposed to. Otherwise, why have RSAs? Wouldn't it be nice if a store owner or manager could know just how efficient and effective the sales staff is? Maybe someone will develop an algorithm to produce a number that could be considered the optimum sales target for a given store. The actual sales figures would then be a measure of sales effectiveness. It should be possible, with a similar algorithm, to produce an optimum sales figure for each sales

"The paradox is;
this under-performing sales person is making \$46,000 per year in commissions and bonuses, which is about what she is costing the company in lost profits."

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“Very often, the internet revolution has converted **UNINFORMED** customers into **MISINFORMED** customers!”

associate. Note: I only offer this as an idea. In my own stores, we had no algorithm, we just guessed, pretty much like everybody else.

Every sales manager and store owner also knows that some RSAs produce more than others. Is this performance disparity a matter of talent, a matter of effort, or is it a combination of both? In some stores, the top performers operate at a high efficiency quotient, and the low performers probably cost the store some of the profits that the top performers accrue with their excellence.

More often than not, the disparity between the top performer and the low performer is far greater than in the example we gave at the beginning of the article. If the skilled, but under-performing RSAs are costing the store \$40,000 per year in profit, how much are you losing with the less effective RSAs? At what point, does the store owner stop and consider, “How much money am I losing every year due to poor sales performance?”

I have read about an interesting psychological phenomenon that can be described as “The fear of loss is greater than the desire for gain.” This may explain why that missing \$100 bill discovered at closing time worries the store manager more than the thousands lost every year from poor sales performance.

What About Incentives?

Incentives can include commissions, bonuses, spiffs and other motivating actions to spur sales. Do they work? Some say they do, and some

say they don't. In recent years, I hear more about an industry trend toward salaried sales people. A famous store owner in the Gulf Coast area of Texas makes a good case for salaried sales employees. Another famous store owner in Colorado makes a good case for commissioned sales people. I've known other store owners who paid a base salary with commissions and bonuses based on performance. We will not argue in this article, pro or con, on the merits of any pay or incentive schedule.

A Good RSA Is Hard To Find

Some stores, especially in smaller markets, have trouble attracting decent applicants for sales positions, especially if the job is commission only. Job seekers are understandably reluctant to jump off into a situation that has no guarantees; and this is especially true for mature adults considering a career change. This wary attitude on the part of sales job applicants is probably less of a problem for well-known stores that have a reputation for high pay. Either way, however, attracting talented, motivated people into furniture retail is usually a challenge for any store, no matter how famous.

Why Do Some RSAs Outperform Others?

This, of course, is the real question, and the stimulus for this article.

Talent, motivation, personality, energy, greed, product knowledge,

focus; all of these elements, among many others, are factors in superior RSA performance. And, on the negative side; indolence, ignorance, self-satisfaction, laziness, distraction, and a few other elements explain lack of performance.

I use the word “talent” frequently when I refer to successful, productive Retail Sales Associates. But, what is talent and how does an interviewer recognize it in a new applicant? Again, if somebody knows how to recognize talent in a new applicant, please call me and let me know. I have been fooled so many times, it pains me to even think about it. I often see potential, but rarely talent.

I try not to use sports analogies, but there is a phrase going around these days that was originally spoken by Bear Bryant, the old Texas A&M and Alabama college football coach who was phenomenally successful in his long career. Among his many well-known and often quoted maxims, this one is the most applicable to the sales training dilemma

“It is not the will to win, but the will to **PREPARE** to win that makes the difference.”

That sentence, I believe, really sums up the word TALENT. If you are willing to prepare, with the goal of becoming fully prepared for the RSA job, then you probably have talent, and you will probably prove that talent in a successful sales career.

Okay, anybody that has read my book or any of my articles knows that

HOW MUCH DO RSAs MATTER?

I really believe in training and preparation. But, what about the RSA in the first paragraph who, even with great talent, lags behind his/her co-workers?

Focus And Execution

Another word we hear a lot today is the word, "focus." To me, it means concentration, execution of the plan, not letting outside distractions get in the way of doing our job.

Imagine Bear Bryant's football team preparing intensely for the Cotton Bowl. Every player is ready. The game starts and on the first play, the speedy wide receiver hurtles down the field in pursuit of a long pass. But on the way down the field, the wide receiver, who also happens to be an ornithology major, notices an unusual bird circling overhead, takes his eye off the ball to observe the bird, loses sight of the ball and a sure touchdown is lost, and then ultimately, the game. The receiver was prepared and talented,

"When a store fields an all-star sales team, then the RSAs will be worth it. RSAs will matter. All it takes is the will to prepare."

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**Mattress Sample
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Material Content, % By Weight	Content	Percentage
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Quilt		
Low-VOC Polyurethane Foam (Wool)		12%
		9%
Cushion		
Certified Organic Latex		10%
Core/Support		
50% Foam Encased Coil Unit		32%
Memory Foam Coil Unit		14%
Foundation/Support (Optional)		
None		
Additional Items (Optional)		
Top Cover, Quilt Backing, Necking, Padding, Strap		

but he lost focus.

Maybe this is why that talented RSA in the first paragraph of this article sells less than another RSA, who may be less talented, but exerts greater focus.

Then, there is execution, which is a fancy way of saying, "Do your job." Using football again, very few games are won with trick plays. Games are won by solid, sensible plays and running those plays correctly every time. That is execution.

Which means, if the RSA prepares, learns how to sell (run the plays), and stays focused, he or she will succeed.

Well, so much for the motivational-speech. What about those pesky distractions that can cause even the talented RSA to lose focus?

Distractions

Is it possible for the RSA to get dis-

"RSA-interaction can get non-productive pretty fast if it is not regulated and policed."

tracted while working the sales floor? I think so, and I think distractions are a major contributor to failure. What are some common distractions?

1. Cell phones. When I started in the furniture business, we didn't have cell phones. Now, we do. We didn't have Facebook, now we do. Ironically, these items can be great tools for business, but they can also be business-killers, and usually are, when it comes to RSA usage of them.

2. Down Time. For most RSAs, the hours spent on the sales floor, especially during slow days, can get pretty boring. Our business has lots of down-time, which COULD be used productively, but rarely is.

3. Other RSAs. It's hard to ignore those other people on the sales floor, and I'm not saying you should ignore them. The problem is, RSA-interaction can get non-productive pretty fast if it is not regulated and policed.

4. Customer problems. Most RSAs like to make sales. Not many like to handle customer problems. Some large stores offer the benefit of a Customer Service Desk for handling inquiries and complaints. But, for many stores, the RSA is not only the salesperson, but also the customer service representative and fielder of complaints. It's probably better if your top performing RSA is taking ups and not explaining to a disgruntled cus-

tomers why the finish is coming off her new night stand.

Now To The Real Problem

We started off this narrative with the question, "Are RSAs Worth It?" We still haven't gotten to the final answer (if there is one), but one more issue needs to be discussed before we conclude. That issue is Sales Management. Once again, we will drag out a sports analogy. How many coach-less Super Bowl champions can you name? How many manager-less World Series champions have been enshrined at Cooperstown?

These are not trivia questions. They are serious issues.

Maybe the great RSAs, the Hall-of-Famers, would still be great without good managers and coaches. But what about the rank and file; the average producers? Could their performances be enhanced with good sales management? I believe the answer to that simple question is self-evident. Very few people are self-starters. Very few workers perform well in an unstructured environment. A good Sales Manager with a smart Sales Management philosophy should build the structured environment in which a sales force of otherwise average sales people could flourish.

Now that we have broached the subject, let me say that this article is not about the attributes of a good Sales Manager, nor is it about building a structured sales environment, but a Furniture World Magazine article is coming soon on this subject.

So, Are RSAs Worth It?

The original question, which asked whether furniture stores really benefit from RSAs or not, has no definitive answer. It's sort of like, should you pay commission or salary? Should you



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RSA's

HOW MUCH DO THEY MATTER?

use RSAs or clerks? It depends on your store and situation.

Let me say this, however. You give me a team of talented RSAs and I will go up against any store in the world, selling anything, with any merchandising or marketing philosophy, and we will beat them.

Things have changed, admittedly, but not that much. As has been stated before in this magazine, "The one-on-one conversation is still the best selling method in the world." And, that is especially true if one of the participants in this conversation is a well-prepared, talented RSA who enjoys the benefit of a strong, structured sales environment with enlightened, intelligent Sales Management.

You don't have the one-on-one sales conversation in Wal-Mart. You don't have it at your local neighborhood grocery store. Rarely do the hard-to-find clerks at those stores have the product knowledge to be very helpful. That's why they put that long ingredient list on the back of the package. I don't know about you, but I think I would be shocked, but pleased, to find a PhD in nutrition working every aisle of the frozen foods section.

But, in our friendly neighborhood furniture and mattress stores, we CAN have this. Every furniture store has the opportunity to put an all-PhD sales team on the floor. When a store fields an all-star sales team, then the RSAs will be worth it. RSAs will matter. All it takes is "the will to prepare."

About David Benbow: David Benbow, a twenty-three year veteran of the mattress and bedding industry, is owner of Mattress Retail Training Company offering retailers retail guidance; from small store management to training

retail sales associates. His years of hands-on experience as a retail sales associate, store manager, sales manager/trainer and store owner in six different metropolitan areas qualifies him as an expert in selling bedding. David is the author of the recently published book, "How to Win the Battle for Mattress Sales, the Bed Seller's Manual", a complete, text book for mattress and bedding retail sales associates, beginner and expe-

rienced professional alike. The book can be purchased on-line at <http://www.bedsellersmanual.com> or www.mattressretailtraining.com.

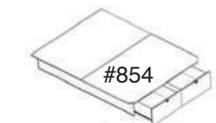
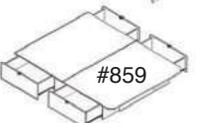
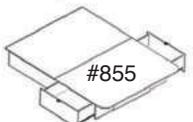
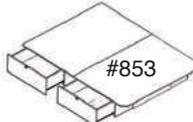
He offers hands-on training classes for retailers on a variety of subjects and on-line classes that can be downloaded from the websites mentioned above. David can be contacted via e-mail at dave@bedsellersmanual.com or by phone at 361-648-3775.



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PRICE RIGHT

By David McMahon, CMA, CSCP

Earning the right to sell more at higher prices is the most important way that the best retailers generate sustained profits and cash flow.

- *"We can't get that price!"*
- *"Nobody will buy it!"*
- *"Our customers like to negotiate!"*
- *"People shop us on the internet!"*
- *"Our competition has the same product and they're undercutting us!"*

Should I go on with the whining? Believe me when I say that I've heard every single excuse. It's time to turn whines into Wins. My response to these excuses and the countless others I regularly hear from retailers is this: If you think that selling on price is your ultimate game, then you're in the commodity business. And to survive in the commodity business, you either need to produce huge volume or provide minimal (and likely unexceptional) service to your customers.

If you truly believe in the products and services you're offering to your customers, you don't need to have low prices in order to sell. I've crisscrossed the globe working with retailers growing sales and margins simultaneously. I've witnessed firsthand that selling more at higher prices is the most important success factor for sustained

high profits and cash flow. This article is about some right ways to achieve this. Henry Ford once said "whether you think you can, or think you can't, you're right" – and those words ring true for our purposes now: For those of you who think you can't sell more volume at a higher price, and those who think you can; both are correct. Please read on with an open mind.

Right Attitude

Customers want to buy what is right for their situation – that's why they are looking in your store after all. They are not interested in being sold, and

"Customers can instantly see through salespeople, and quickly detect both need-to-sell and help-me-buy attitudes, right from the jump."

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“Have sales team members

set their own goals based on desired income. Encourage them to think big. Tell them there is no penalty for not hitting their goals.”

they will only accept the help they may or may not need from someone who has their best interests at heart. They can instantly see through salespeople, and quickly detect both need-to-sell and help-me-buy attitudes, right from the jump.

The salespeople who keep customer's genuine interests at heart are the ones who are able to communicate effectively and offer the right solutions. They build authentic relationships that gives them the right to ask for the sale. These are the salespeople that customers want to buy from.

Salespeople must realize: It is never about them – it's about the customer. The second a salesperson thinks of themselves when working with a customer, the purchase becomes less likely. Unfortunately, attitude is not trainable, it's habitual. And modifying poor attitudes takes time, repetition of proper actions, constant monitoring and management. Hiring a person with an attitude of service plus the ability to converse, listen, make a proposal and then shut-up, trumps industry experience when weighing hire options and building your team.

The right selling attitude is the required first step in maximizing your top line and selling at the highest gross margin. You see, if a customer is serviced beyond their expectations, price becomes less of a factor in the buying decision. Time is valuable, and where a salesperson spends the right amount of time with a customer (not too little, not too much), extra value is created in that customer's mind.

Right Number of Salespeople

Why were sales up? Why were sales down? You know the answers you often get if you ask these questions to salespeople. “Customer traffic was good” or “customer traffic was poor”, right? This could be true, however, these answers are often provided without the use of hard data, so really they are only guesses.

I've witnessed countless instances where customers went unserved long enough that they decided to leave. This doesn't happen in your business, does it? You see, when all of your salespeople are working with customers or working with too many customers at once, other customers get lost to the point of almost becoming indivisible.

Imagine for a moment that you're fishing on a boat with five other people. Suppose there are plenty of fish in the sea, and that you have the best fishing technique on the boat plus some irresistible bait. With five hooks in the water, how many fish could you possibly catch at any one time? Five, right? Now suppose the fish down there are all different sizes – some big, some average and some tiny. What size will the five fish be? Who knows? It will likely be a mix – whatever fish swims by the hook first. Now, what if, you had ten people fishing? Well, assuming there were still enough fish, you could likely get ten fish at any one time and double your catch. Finally, what if the number of people fishing just barely outnumbered the amount of fish in the water? You would maxi-

mize your catch. At the end of the day, the people who were best at fishing would eat the most, and those who had poor technique would go hungry. In any event, the boat would have a bigger catch with the proper number of people fishing.

The same thing is true for selling and properly servicing customers. To maximize sales volume, you must, must, must, know your traffic without a doubt, and then staff appropriately during peak times.

Right Goals

It is pretty easy to ballpark the sales volume that an operation can achieve. Here are two ways:

1. Take the total goals of all the salespeople and subtract 5 to 10%.
2. Multiply the number of salespeople by an average, consistent performing team member's sales (often around \$40K-50K / month).

The problem with retailer goals is either they are not ambitious enough, or they're non-existent. A-players in life have big goals. They may not always meet them, but they get a lot farther along than those who target averages. Those people who don't have any goals and lack a set plan are aimless and living off of luck. They often get the short end of the stick.

With respect to goal selling and hitting those goals, here are some practices that I believe in:



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I see mostly ongoing product training and very little selling systems training. In my opinion, this needs to be reversed."

- Set individual sales and margin goals that are a stretch. (This is different than accounting budgeted goals).
- Have sales team members set their own goals based on desired income. Encourage them to think big. Tell them there is no penalty for not hitting their goals.
- Avoid incentivizing people for hitting their goals. Instead, incentivize people and teams for being top performers or improving themselves.
- Define a subset of selling metrics that are constantly tracked. Ensure that salespeople understand how their goals can be achieved by affecting their metrics. Examples of metrics could include KPI's such as: revenue / selling opportunity, average sale, and gross margin.
- Train around improving these metrics. Overall sales volume growth and margins will follow.

Right Selling System

A selling system is a necessary documented tool that acts as guide to direct the salesperson along the road of serving the customer the right way. When speaking of a selling system, I specifically use the words: necessary, documented, tool, and guide.

A selling system is necessary because without one, the team operates in a sort of chaos – sometimes controlled chaos, sometimes uncontrolled. The selling system outlines the best practic-

es with the different parts of the sale, and puts the team in the desired direction. I define the 5 parts of the selling system as:

1. Greeting
2. Understanding
3. Solving
4. Closing
5. Following up

Defining your system underneath these parts is critical. It helps people to act the right way more often, improves the game of average team performers, and gets new hires up-to-speed more quickly.

A selling system is documented, because otherwise, nothing told or said will be retained and organized day-in-and-day-out. A documented system can be reviewed, posted, updated easily and used consistently. Repetition and practice of the right techniques is the way to mastery.

I'm also a believer in keeping the system as brief as possible (under 5 pages for sure). Too much detail is overwhelming. It must also be simple to read, well-written, and based in reality. By-in is critical, so for this reason, I suggest obtaining input from team members for its creation and ongoing maintenance.

The documentation helps the salesperson with common complaints such as, "Is that the best you can do for me?" Or "Is there any discount?" Or "I'm spending 20 Grand with you, shouldn't I get a discount?" I can list twenty more, and I'm sure you can

too. Your system helps your team remember that they could respond with comments such as: "I agreed with you!" (Always agree), and "We are 110% committed to servicing your needs, now and into the future" or "Our price reflects our value and unwavering commitment to you. Do you agree that you will absolutely love your new room with these options?" (Nod, smile, and shut up). Don't say more than necessary and close when the buying signal presents itself. Asking for a discount is just a buying signal.

A selling system is a tool and a guide because it is not the law. Any salesperson should be able to go off script when the situation with the customer dictates it. For example, suppose the selling system says that in the initial conversation stage the preferred welcome is: "Welcome to XYZ Furniture and Design. (Pause for thank you). Which room are you looking at today?" In this particular situation, however, the salesperson notices that the customer is wearing a finishers t-shirt from a local triathlon that they themselves also ran in – go off-script! You have something in common. Make a friend and you will have a customer for life.

Require salespeople to thoroughly know, practice, be tested on and implement your selling system. Also, allow them to adapt it to fulfill the requirements and requests of customers or situations, provided desired conclusions are reached.

A customized selling system is a must-have for selling more at higher prices. If your customers love your selling system, you have a good one.

Right Management / Leadership / Training

Training is continually practicing the selling system, which means repeatedly going over the techniques to improve selling metrics. Consistently observe and provide feedback of in-the-field performance. The operative words here are continual and repeat.

I've witnessed managers too many times sitting in offices with their heads buried in computers doing so-called management work. Sales management is not office work. Sales management is not support work. Salespeople are in the business of managing customers, which means they need to be working with customers in one way or another for most of their time. Sales managers are in the business of managing salespeople, which means they need to be working with salespeople in one way or another for most of their time. Make sense? One of best sales managers I have encountered said to me "Dave, I don't have an office. My office is the floor!" Not by coincidence, his company sales have increased over 40% in 3 years. Margins were up 12%.

Managing By The Numbers?

I'm not exactly a huge fan of that saying. You gauge performance by the numbers at scheduled intervals. That is not managing, that is evaluating. Managing is an interactive activity, not an after-the-fact exercise. You should manage by observation, provide feedback and leadership to improve the metrics gauged.

Leadership and Management are not the same. A good leader sets the course and tone of the business for the team to follow with purpose. A manager ensures that team members are doing the right things day in day out.

In the field, I see mostly ongoing product training and very little selling systems training. In my opinion, this needs to be reversed. To maximize sales and margins, Leadership, Management and Training are all critical.

Right Incentives

Give me 20 random companies, I'll show 20 different compensation plans. I often have the question in my mind, "Why is this so difficult"? You pay the best people the most money, because they're

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"Standard pricing levels

should be set at least 5 gross margin percentage points higher than where you wish to end up on your P&L if you have a lean inventory.

team players who perform the way you want them to perform, right?

So, what do you want salespeople to do? Simple question. Simple answer.

If anyone disagrees with me here, please send me an email – we can debate it.

You want salespeople to:

- *Service the customer to the highest level.*
- *Continually improve on selling more.*
- *Continually improve the margin they sell at.*
- *Demonstrate leadership to the sales team and set a positive example.*

If this is what you want, build your commission structure totally around this, by:

- *Establishing individual sales commission rates that are variable with delivered gross margin.*
- *Establishing individual pay for performance bumps based on written sales dollar thresholds at gross margin percentage standards.*
- *Establishing team written volume.*

bonuses that are split up between salespeople by percent of gross margin dollars achieved

Right Product Merchandising

A supportive product merchandising strategy is necessary for sales people to sell more at higher prices. Having more of the right product on display, at the right price, time and in the right fashion, assists both customers and salespeople with making favorable transactions.

The right product is determined by what is selling. Achieving a higher percentage of the showroom devoted to best-sellers will lead to higher sales. I have written extensively in the past on strategies on how to do this by constantly reviewing your merchandise lineup. Understand which products are top sellers, decent sellers and non-sellers, and then take action. Good sellers should always be displayed and kept in appropriate quantities for the projected rate of sale and lead time. Non-sellers should be put into a markdown routine to remove them from your line-up.

Furthermore, keeping a better mix

of best sellers as opposed to "Dogs" allows you to try new merchandise more often. It keeps the floor fresh and increases the odds of finding new top sellers.

Pricing of the best sellers and new merchandise should be set to maximize margins. If you can't get margin here, you will never get it. From my experience, standard pricing levels should be set at least 5 gross margin percentage points higher than where you wish to end up on your P&L if you have a lean inventory. For select items and groups, the standard pricing ceiling should be tested. Pricing for margin is a game of detail. Price point is what matters with detailed pricing. On a piece-by-piece or group-by-group basis, inch up the price-point to where it makes sense in the big picture lineup. With regard to markdown items, take a step approach where increasingly severe discounts and/or spiffs are applied. Use a 3-5 period down-step approach to achieve higher margins and faster turns.

The fashion in which you display your merchandise, prices and product information will either add to sales and margin or detract from it. Answer these questions about the products on your floor:

- *Is all our available merchandise on display?*
- *Do the vignette settings look clean with the appropriate pieces in each room setting?*
- *Is there a variety of options?*
- *Is it easy for the customer and salesperson to work the floor?*
- *Is all the information available quickly to make a buying decision?*

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RIGHT FOLLOW-UP
RIGHT INCENTIVES
RIGHT MANAGEMENT
RIGHT LEADERSHIP
RIGHT TRAINING
RIGHT SELLING SYSTEM
RIGHT GOALS
RIGHT STAFFING
RIGHT ATTITUDE

- Can we price special order and custom jobs quickly?
- Is their package pricing with individual options shown?
- Is there info or proper POP on design, accident insurance, and delivery?

In all this, functioning IT systems allow for information to be known at a moment's notice so that quick actions can be taken. Those inventory managers who are the best at the merchandising game will typically get 5-10 margin percentage points ahead of their peers.

Right Follow-up

Follow-up is actually the fifth part of an exceptional selling system. I'll conclude this article with this important element in greater detail. It helps pave the way to sell more at higher prices into the future. Here are two important facts:

1. Return customers produce higher revenue per opportunity and greater margin.

"Inventory managers who are the best at the merchandising game will typically get **5-10 margin percentage points ahead of their peers.**"

2. Return customers cost less marketing dollars per customer to bring back.

This is true simply because customers return only if they enjoyed their experience with you. Now, because they enjoyed their experience, they are a warm audience. They know you, they like you, and they appreciate what you provided for them. They trust you, and price is secondary to you having helped them find the right solution for their situation. Return customers tend to buy more often, are OK with ordering, and are open to more complete room solutions. They will tell their friends and family about you.

Prior happy customers that you keep in contact with will think of you when they are in the market for what you offer before your competition. This is a primary purpose of the follow-up – the cheapest form of marketing. There are several follow-up points that can help you get repeat customers back more often. Here is a short list:

- Email or text a 'thank you' with e-receipt (for purchases) within five minutes of leaving the store.
- Personal written sales thank-you note and/or a call.
- Special order status update.
- Delivery scheduling.
- Personal after delivery thank you note.
- Six month anniversary of purchase communication.
- Next purchase.
- Private sale invites prior to any events.

- Top customer routine follow-up

Those salespeople who work their prior customer lists the right way become known and develop a following for themselves and your business. They get more be-backs and thus have less need to live-on-the-door. They will be able to sell more and get decent margins in less time. They are professionals.

Taking the right actions with your business will give you the right to sell more at higher prices. You will maximize your revenue per customer served, and, you will do it by providing what really sets you apart – A truly better customer experience.

About David McMahan: David McMahan, CMA, CSCP is a Management Consultant, Certified Supply Chain Professional and Certified Accountant. He is VP of Performance Groups for PROFITsystems, a HighJump Product. He can be reached at david.mcmahan@highjump.com.

✓ Mattress

5 BIG DISCOVERIES

That No One Else is Telling You About!

by Jeff Giagnocavo

Many hard-working retailers struggle to earn the money and live the lifestyle they deserve.

If you find yourself overworked and under-paid, you are probably focusing hard on bringing new customers to your front door. Yet if your closing rate is low, and you aren't maximizing the sales tickets you already write, you may find yourself using excessive and wasteful advertising in an attempt to fix this problem. It's a recipe for failure and there is a smarter way to operate your business.

Trying to improve poor closing rates by relying heavily on vendors to bring in information and support is another common tactic. It's easy to rely mostly on reps for training, and it's economical, but if that's the only place you're getting information, as a fellow retailer, I'm here to tell you that's a very dangerous way to go about improving your business. I can count on one hand the really great reps I know who have the talent and take the time to help retailers grow their businesses.

You may also have invested money in programs to train your salespeople, but most sales training programs only focus on what to do once a customer is in front of you. They don't tell you how to get more customers and how to actually grow your business. And no matter how many times and in how many ways your salespeople ask customers to buy, if you don't have

a process in place to dramatically increase close rates, you are leaving a lot on the table.

If you find yourself on this kind of treadmill, I think you will be interested in the following five discoveries that came to light from recent conversations with retailers just like you.

1. Use Your Vendors Differently: You may already have all the information and products you need to run an amazing store. It is likely, however, that the biggest issue holding you back, revolves around doing what you've always done and expecting a different result. Take an honest look at your advertising over the last five years, three years, even the last year. What, if anything, has changed? What was different about your product merchandise mix over these years? What was different about your sales training process? Most retailers who are being honest will admit that almost nothing has changed in spite of their desire to sell more, and make more money. Trying the same thing and expecting different results is Einstein's definition of insanity.

The first area I suggest you look at is how to merchandise your products in ways that you never thought of, to get more sales at higher and more predictable profits. For example, one of our 'natural' vendors offers a cer-



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"If you don't start a conversation on your website, you are just collecting impressions, and impressions can't be deposited in the bank."

tified organic foundation at \$900. For the person wishing to have an organic certified mattress set and base, it has value.

A starting price adjustable bed base from Serta in our store is the same price as this certified organic foundation, also \$900. A customer might choose to purchase the organic set paired with the organic flat foundation, but most customers who buy an organic mattress only care about what they're directly lying on. So, we now offer customers the option of "upgrading" to an adjustable base as a package deal! What this does on the back-end for us is stop "show-rooming". By offering the adjustable bed base packaged with the organic sleep set at the same

price, but with more value and function, we are able to win the business of the handful of customers who previously used our showroom to test out the mattress and then went online to buy. It's a value Gardner's Mattresses & More customers can only find within our four walls. As an added benefit to us in this example, the adjustable bed base package option actually puts an extra \$75 to the bottom line, as the adjustable base is less expensive than the organic foundation!

Another example of creative re-merchandising includes bundling lower cost but good quality, pillows, sheets, protectors and protection plans into a package. This is something we do to provide a great value for customers, at less cost.

One vendor affords us the opportunity to promote a \$419.34 value package while having a hard cost of only \$105. This package includes a choice of two pillows with three options, a mattress protector and pillow protector, plus 600 thread count sheets in a choice of four colors. We've also found that when bundling or packaging our offers, it's a good idea to give customers the opportunity to choose the specific pillow, mattress protector or sheet set that goes into their package. Customers who get a choice of options, view our package deals as an opportunity, and not as just stuff we want to give them or get rid of.

2. Find The Missing Piece: There's a saying that little hinges swing big doors and that couldn't be more true in our industry. Often you need

just one more piece in your business puzzle to explode sales. For our store, Gardner's Mattresses and More, this missing piece was to offer a store-wide comfort guarantee.

We developed a Dream Room, inspired by car dealerships that allow customers to take a car home for the weekend, before buying. We built a room that looks like a high-end hotel room in our store. When a customer shows an interest in a mattress, we allow them to try that bed out for an hour or two. Once a customer has thoroughly "drive tested" a mattress we feel confident that we've found the right fit and can stand behind it.

Our Dream Room closes at a 100%. Each and every week we have 2 to 4 appointments that yield four thousand dollar average tickets. We can forecast sales by just looking at the number of Dream Room appointments we have booked. That's very freeing, gives us tremendous peace of mind and is also very profitable.

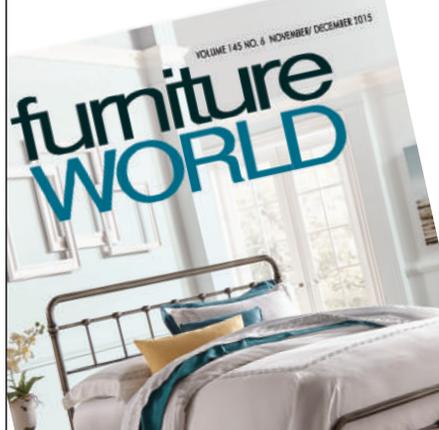
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3. Focus On Conversations: What mattress retailers think they need, they don't really need at all. Most everyone says, "I need more customers". I'm here to tell you, you don't need more customers. What you need are better systems, and better processes to convert shoppers to buyers. What you need is something to take all the momentum you're creating, and all the advertising that you're doing, to capture all those eyeballs, all those impressions, all that awareness.

You're flushing money down the drain if you don't have a way to immediately begin a conversation with somebody once they've hit your website. If you don't start a conversation, you are just collecting impressions, and impressions can't be deposited in the bank. More new customers in most cases isn't what you need, and I've seen retailers spend themselves right out of business. You need to convert better, you need to raise that closing percentage number from 45 to 50 to 55, 60 to 70% which is where our stores sit. We do this by converting all those "be-backs" automatically in a timely, relevant and personal way. You don't need more customers, you need a system to manage what's already coming to you to better monetize the investments in advertising you are making.

4. To thrive you must curate a better experience: Today, just creating impressions and clicks is not a recipe for success. To get real results, you need to create desire. The best way to do this is not necessarily to change vendors or bring in new merchandise. What you need to embrace

is a better way to present, propose and deliver your solutions. Your number one job is to create an exceptional consumer experience.

If you are satisfied with selling customers a quality mattress at a fair price, and delivering it, you will continue to struggle because that type of consumer experience can be had at Costco, Sam's Club and, without even leaving home, by using Amazon.

You probably already have all the pieces to be super successful. You've been in business for a while, you're the local expert, you're the guy who does right by his community, you support the local little league team. When the phone rings and a charity needs a bed for a displaced family from a fire, you're there. If it seems like customers have forgotten about you, it's probably because you have not developed a better experience to create desire and a better connection with customers so they want to do business with you.

5. Run Your Business. Don't Let it Run You: There is a foundational solution for every store owner. And it resides in having a commitment to implement systems and process in your business. That means you can't afford to have a fly by the seat of your pants mentality.

A McDonald's store owner is contractually NOT allowed to be in his restaurant flipping burgers, it is NOT part of the system. You too should have a system in place that allows you not to be in your store and still have it run smoothly and profitably. Such a system can have your sales staff sending one-off emails to "be-backs", handwriting thank you cards, and

scribbling down phone numbers to make follow up calls. But with all the technology available today you can make it much easier and effective via a series of complex and reliable pieces of software, plug ins and third party vendors.

A proper automated system based on your curated experience, and focused on conversions can run your business for you, and not the other way around.

About Jeff Giagnocvo: *Jeff Giagnocavo is the Chief Sales Officer of Infotail Systems, Inc., a profit automation company empowering you to get 100% of the profits you deserve, 100% of the time, automatically. For more information visit www.Infotail.com.*

"There is a foundational solution for every store owner. And it resides in having a commitment to implementing systems and process in your business."



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OUR LEATHER FUTURE

What might furniture retailers need to know about a lab-grown future?

By Kelli Bollman

Is lab-grown leather something furniture retailers might be selling in the very near future?

Here's the (multi) million dollar question. Is it necessary to rely on animals for the meat, eggs, milk and leather products consumed and used daily by billions of people around the world?

Some companies are on a mission to prove the answer is "no" through the development of biofabrication processes that could make animal protein and lab-grown leather a viable mainstream option for consumers. However, despite the early success some of these companies have generated with biofabricated leather samples, real and warranted skepticism still exists. Are consumers ready for lab-grown leather? Will biofabricated leather cost more than the animal-based alternative? Will biofabrication entrepreneurs be able to beat the clock – developing products that can be sold to the masses before investor patience wears thin and their funding runs dry?

It's an interesting topic for anyone in the furniture industry and one that warrants an open-ended, educational discussion. Let's dig deeper into the definition and history of biofabrication, the potential positives and negatives associated with lab-grown leather, and how this type of leather may (or may not) change the leather and furniture industries.

Biofabrication and Lab Grown Leather

According to a 2014 Wall Street Journal article, biofabrication is a tissue engineering technique that can grow cells by obtaining tissue samples through small biopsies that don't hurt, injure or kill animals. This technique could prove vital to environmental sustainability as growing population numbers will likely put our planet at risk due to the amount of land animals required to sustain more people. Consider the following from a 2013 TED Talk delivered by Andras Forgacs, CEO of Modern Meadow – one of the first companies to prioritize biofabrication research and development:

- In 2012, 60 million land animals were required to provide meat/dairy products and leather goods for the roughly 7 billion people worldwide.
- By 2050, more than 100 million land animals will be required to provide the same for the anticipated worldwide population of 10 billion people.
- So – what does that mean? Maintaining a land animal herd that large would have a devastat-

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“While the environmental

advantages associated with biofabrication could be massive, there is a lot of uncertainty about how future conditions may affect the market for leather used in the furniture industry.”

ing effect on the environment. In 2012, land animals were already responsible for inhabiting 33% of dry land, consuming 8% of global water, and emitting 18% of the world’s greenhouse gasses.

- And biofabricated, lab-grown leathers could provide a viable solution that protects the planet. In fact, *One Green Planet* reports that lab-grown products will use 99% less land, consume 96% less water, and emit 96% fewer greenhouse gases, with minimal waste, and no risk of livestock diseases.

While the environmental advantages associated with biofabrication could be massive, there is a lot of uncertainty about how future conditions may affect the market for leather used in the furniture industry.

Leather is a byproduct of the meat industry and according to a Food and Agricultural report released by the United Nations, the per capita consumption of beef is expected to grow from 10.1 Kg per person in 2015 to 10.6 Kg in 2030. At the same time, human population growth will increase from 7.35 billion in 2015 to 8.5 billion people in 2030.

Based on just these estimates, leather production should continue to increase, although it’s not certain that it will keep pace with growth in demand for leather, especially high quality leather used in leather seating. Nor is the future clear regarding

how environmental issues will play out with regard to leather production and pricing.

Even so, biofabrication companies like Brooklyn, NY-based Modern Meadow (<http://www.modernmeadow.com>) are betting that the world is at the start of an emerging trend that will cause consumers and furniture retailers to seek out affordable and environmentally friendly alternatives to traditional leather.

Biofabrication & Its Implications

While lab-grown leather may seem like the perfect alternative, it could also be too good to be true. As a 2015 Guardian article suggests, Modern Meadow and their contemporaries are still a long way from turning lab samples into consumer-ready products. And despite increased leather costs, the public may not be ready for lab-grown leather.

As my company, Creative Colors, described in a recent blog post, “Choose Leather that Fits Your Lifestyle,” many types of leather already exist and customers often purchase “faux” or bonded leather due to the affordable price. Some people know this type of leather as “pleather” – a substitute for real leather that can easily be mistaken for real leather.

The major issue consumers often

associate with bonded leather is that it may scratch, rip, tear and become discolored. While many customers believe the price is right upon purchase, they often end up spending more in the long run as they are forced to more quickly replace these items.

However, there are some serious advantages afforded by the biofabrication process that may overcome potential roadblocks. In addition to disconnecting the relationship between the meat industry and leather, lab-grown leather process is considerably more efficient than the traditional, animal-based process. Modern Meadow’s Creative Director, Suzanne Lee, says it takes her company about 1.5 months to make a finished square-foot leather sample. Compare that to the 2-3 years it requires to raise, feed and shelter an animal before the traditional process can even begin. And that doesn’t even take into account the fact that the biofabrication process eliminates waste entirely and affords leather makers significantly more control over the look, feel and shape of the final product.

Regardless, the short-term prospects for lab-grown leather and its long-term viability is likely contingent on these key factors.

- Will biofabrication technology improve to a point where production costs for biofabrication become competitive?
- Will consumers consider the untar-

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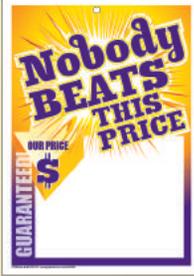
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leather FUTURE

“Modern Meadow and its contemporaries are still a long way from turning lab samples into consumer-ready products. And despite increased leather costs, the public may not be ready for lab-grown leather.”

nished, unscarred final product the real, durable, and authentic leather they crave?

- Will environmental concerns create a preference for bio-fabricated leather?
- Will there be a mis-match in the future between the supply of quality leather and demand?

Is Lab Grown Leather the Future?

At Creative Colors, we have been fortunate enough to work with some of the best home furnishing retailers

in the country, and around the world, for more than 35 years as a leading repair and restoration franchise. And in that time, we've discovered the key distinction between average and great home furnishings retailers is their ability to educate customers on the leather products that best fit their budget, lifestyle and expectations. Of course, the key to getting that right is ensuring store managers and salespeople understand current trends and available product options.

So – what's the takeaway on bio-fabrication? It's clear that at some point the leather and furniture industry will need a man-made, environmentally friendly and cost effective leather replacement. If the biofabrication process can generate leather that is comparable to traditional, animal-based leather in quality and durability at an affordable cost, companies like Modern Meadow will have uncovered a goldmine. However, if furniture retailers buy in too early and these lab-grown leather products fail to meet quality expectations, the industry could suffer from warranty issues and unnecessary repair expenses.

If biofabrication allows consumers to access cheaper leather products that they believe in, this trend would represent a boon for the entire leather and furniture industry. The bottom line is that biofabrication and the development of lab-grown leather is an exciting and potentially transformative trend that furniture retailers should track with a curious and discerning eye. Here's to hoping we can all benefit from man-made leather products that keep our planet safer and our wallets thicker in the near future!

About Kelli Bollman: Kelli Bollman is the Vice President of Creative Colors International, a leading national repair and restoration franchise, and President of J&J's Creative Colors Inc., a privately-held repair and restoration company serving South Chicago and the Southern Suburbs. Bollman is a passionate, optimistic and personable executive who leads Creative Colors International's training programs and oversees all operations at J&J's Creative Colors, Inc. She can be reached at kelli.bollman@creativecolorsinc.com.

Launched in 1991, the Creative Colors International (CCI) franchise system was created through its affiliate, J&J's Creative Colors, an industry leader in refurbishment techniques and systems. Today, both companies continue to be family-owned and operated by the second generation. Catering to the abundance of upholstered items in every home, business and vehicle, CCI is the ultimate in on-site repair, restoration, cleaning, protection, and dyeing of leather, vinyl, plastic and fabric. Through proprietary technology, CCI restores damaged material at a fraction of replacement costs, saving customers up to 90 percent. CCI repairs are stronger than the original area and are nearly invisible to the naked eye. In the Automotive, Furniture and Commercial Markets, CCI offers on-site repair and restoration to all types of leather, vinyl, fabric, plastic and carpeting by repairing and redyeing holes, cuts, tears, burns, scrapes, fading and discoloration. For more information on CCI's services and franchise opportunities, visit www.wecanfixthat.com.

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FINDING THE EXIT

by Jeff York

This is the first part in a two-part series of articles concerned with the value of having an exit strategy in place before you need one.

Store owners generally do a really good job of planning store openings, but hardly ever consider planning an exit strategy. Store closing is a subject that is taboo for most furniture store owners to think about, much less plan for. Promotional companies, or liquidation specialists, thrive on working for furniture stores without an exit strategy that are on the verge of bankruptcy.

If you are one of these owners who has not given serious thought to an exit strategy for your business, you need to read on. The information you will find in this series of articles may just help you salvage your future and go happily into that goodnight! This article will inform you of the danger signs that strongly suggest that it is time to plan to exit your business. It also includes tips and suggestions to assist store owners with conducting a successful store closing event.

Danger Signs

“What are the signs that would suggest that I should start thinking about closing my store?” I’m glad you asked! Here are the five major signs followed by an explanation about how each might impact your business.

1. An economic downturn in your city due to the closing of one or more major employers.
2. One of the major big-box national furniture chains opens a store very near your own location.
3. Strip shopping centers in your area begin to close up.
4. Your business has declined for the last three years.
5. You have personally financed some or all of the operations of your business more than three months in a row.

#1 - An economic downturn

As a store owner you know it is up to you to stay informed about business conditions in your community. This is especially true if you live in a small to middle sized town with one or two major employers. The first thing you need to understand is that you have no control over a company moving operations to another city or worse yet, closing their doors. You can, however, control what you do when this happens.

“When store sales have been in decline for three years or more this is a strong signal that change is needed.”

Whenever a major employer moves or ceases operations you need to get out and visit other retailers in your area. Talk to the owners or store managers and find out if their business is being affected by the actions of this employer. When people, who live primarily from paycheck to paycheck, lose their jobs, the first thing they do is to stop buying anything but what they need to live. All purchases that can be postponed usually are: that includes clothes, homes, cars, new electronics, appliances and unfortunately furniture.

Besides getting out to find out how other retailers in your area are doing, you need to take a very close look at who your customers are. If many of your customers were also employees of the company that is closing or moving out of town, start preparing

for the worst. Get in touch with your cities' economic development department and find out if there are any new companies looking to open a location in or around your city. If so, find out when they plan to start operations and how many people they intend to hire. If this new company will be able to compensate for lost jobs within the next 6 months, you may be able to weather this downturn in economic activity. If this isn't the case you need to seriously consider exiting the market before you lose your business.

One good way to keep informed about the employers in your area is to join the Chamber of Commerce in your city and participate in the Chamber's activities. Most major employers will also be members of the Chamber. Network with their representatives so

you can stay ahead of the curve and have time to conduct a high impact event to raise extra cash while your customers still have jobs.

#2 - A major big-box retailer comes to town

On your way home from work you come up on some new construction and you read that dreaded sign; “Big-Box Furniture Store Coming Soon”! There are two responses you can choose when this happens. One is to hang your head and decide that the end of your business is near. Or, you can invite all your current customers to participate in an event. If there was ever a time to accelerate communica-

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"The very first time

you take your own earnings to support some of your store's operations should raise a huge red flag!"

big to fail!

#3 - Strip shopping centers begin to close

tions with your current customers it is when you know a "big-box furniture retailer" is coming to town.

Before you panic, you need to also consider whether or not this big-box store will cater to your customers. Will they offer some of the same products you offer? Consider the price points they offer in each furniture category. After all this consideration if you come to the conclusion that you are going to be fighting for the same customer, you may want to start making plans to exit the market. You don't have to execute these plans but you definitely need to have a plan in place. Get in touch with a reputable company that can give

you advice about how to maximize a store closing event. Get all the particulars such as realistic sales projections, the proper level of inventory to have on hand, a plan for graduating the discounts during the course of the event and a complete plan on how to set up your store for the event.

Hoping for the best without preparing for the worst in this circumstance is why many furniture store owners find themselves out of business with nothing to show for all their years of hard work. There have been many national furniture chains that are no longer in business because they had no exit strategy in place. No business is too

As seasoned retailers we all know that success is often about location, location, location! Retail shoppers are mobile, but retail stores are stationary so, when you see stores in Strip Shopping Centers closing their doors, it usually means that shoppers are relocating to another area. If you are a well-established furniture store with a large enough customer base that you don't need new customers, these store closings may not have any effect on you. If you still need new customers to support your business you need to consider moving your business to a new retail location if possible. Sometimes the cost to move operations to a new location is just too



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In-store resources:
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DESIGNERS:

Clients with small children need to know the importance of anchoring furniture, appliances and TVs.

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FINDING THE EXIT

high. So what do you do?

Typically a furniture retailer stuck in this dilemma will resort to offering their products at a discount to entice shoppers to come back. This often leads to the store becoming a discount retailer with barely enough profit margin on products to keep their operation alive. It may make better business sense to consider closing your operation at the first sign that the retail market is moving to a different local. If you have a solid exit strategy in place before your retail market collapses, you may be able to liquidate your store and use the proceeds to move to a better location. In retail we know that timing is everything. If you are not prepared to respond to a change in your retail market you could end up an unemployed business owner with little or no financial safety net.

#4 - Your business declined for the past three years

There are many reasons why a retail furniture store could have a decline in sales from one year to the next. But when store sales have been in decline for three years or more this is a strong signal that change is needed. As a store owner you have three options; re-invent your store, move location or close.

What happens more times than we care to admit is the store owner tries to "ride it out." Sales continue to decline until the store closes down.

A better response to this circumstance would be to have a high impact orderly liquidation of all inventory and open a new business in another location. This can be accomplished only if you have a carefully thought out plan to exit your market. This is where a professional familiar with orderly fur-

niture liquidations can help. Having your exit strategy in place months before you execute it gives you the best opportunity for a successful event. An even better plan would be to work with an exit strategy consultant before sales begin to lag and have your plan ready before it's too late to execute an effective store closing event.

#5 - You are personally financing your operation

You may be in trouble if you have personally financed some or all of the operations of your business more than three months in a row.

The very first time you have to take some of your own earnings to support some or all of your store's operations should raise a huge red flag! If your business is not cash-flowing and funding all operations you need to act fast. This does not mean that you shouldn't invest personally in expanding your operations. That is a totally different business decision. What I am warning you about is spending your own money to keep your business open. The first time this happens take a close look at your payroll. Are you overstaffed? If so, will your business be alright if you eliminate or limit the hours of one or more employees? I recently talked with an owner who had a three-store operation. He also had a central office filled with employees who supervised the supervisors in each department in each store. In other words, he was paying more than double the amount necessary for his supervisory team.

If you have cut your payroll as far as you can and you are still funding your operations personally, one solution is to consider running an "Emergency Cash Raising Event" and see if you can raise enough cash to get your operational expenses

covered. Maybe a well-orchestrated "Wall-to-Wall Liquidation Event" will get your business back on solid financial ground, allowing you to re-invent your store for future success. You need to think very carefully about how you will respond to your current business situation. The point is this; if your store is not cash-flowing, you need to do something radical fast!

About Jeff York: Jeff York is a veteran of the furniture industry with over 15 years of experience in management and consulting. He was a Managing Partner for the furniture division of a consulting and liquidation firm where he prepared marketing packages and managed store closing events for furniture stores from Sarasota Florida to Cleveland Ohio. Currently Mr. York consults with small business owners and prepares custom marketing packages for furniture store owners who want to do their own Store Closing, Going Out Of Business or other High Impact furniture event. To find out more, visit his website at www.diyfurn-promo.com.

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