



BOUNCING BACK

Local retailers weather the storm with personalized service and distinctive merchandise.

Retailing in Jacksonville—and the nation at large—has been a challenge in recent years. A sluggish economy and increased Internet sales have forced small business owners, in particular, to get creative.

Many have survived by staying in contact with loyal customers, offering incentives for referrals and holding promotional sales, but the most important factors that have kept these businesses afloat are extraordinary products and exceptional service.

Buying clothing designed for the local consumer is critical for Leila's Delicious Fashions in San Marco. With a bounty of women's clothing stores in the region, manager Summer McLaughlin says they have to find things that are a little bit different.

"When we're picking up a new line, the first thing we ask is 'Does anyone else in Jack-

sonville sell it?'"

In addition to its clothing options, Leila's sells a personalized shopping experience. Customers are offered wine or water when they enter the store, and McLaughlin keeps track of what they buy. When an item comes in that would suit the customer's personal style, she calls and invites them into the store for a look.

"When you think about it, some of the better department stores in bigger cities operate that way, too."

During the worst part of the recession, Leila's offered special incentives, but McLaughlin credits "buy local" initiatives with helping the store weather the storm.

In addition to the national Small Business Saturday campaign, an American Express initiative, local campaigns such as "Jax Cash Mob" have made an impact on retailers.

Each month, since April 2012, organizers of "Jax Cash Mob" have chosen a local retailer to support. Through Facebook, participants are notified of the time and place for the "Cash Mob" event, and they all converge on the store with \$10 or \$20 in their wallets to spend on local products.

Robert Myers, a certified business analyst with the University of North Florida's Small Business Development Center, says the impact can be very significant for the chosen retailer. Sales in one hour from a "cash mob" visit can equal a week's worth of sales for some small businesses. "It's a demonstration of community involvement and support."

Unusual products help set small retailers apart, but providing exemplary customer service builds repeat clientele. Because small retailers have personal interaction with the consumer,

they can identify what the customer wants more readily than the big box stores, and they can tailor their service to meet the customer's needs.

Willie's for Kids, a Jacksonville upscale shopping institution, knows a thing or two about customer service. For 34 years, they have catered to families in their Avondale store.

As Whitley Hyde, Willie's granddaughter, pulls a custom-made silk dress from its hiding place in the closet, the shell-pink garment practically shimmers in the natural light. The flower girl's dress, designed to match others in the wedding party, has delicately monogrammed letters on the bodice in matching pink thread. "You can't find that at the mall," Hyde says.

In addition to arranging alterations, if necessary, the store gift wraps all purchases at no charge and sends weekly emails to customers reminding them of promotional sales and notifying them when new items arrive. "We take good care of our customers," Hyde says.

The store has recently built a website as well, which is something certified business analyst Kevin Monahan says small businesses must embrace to remain competitive. "If they don't, they will not be here."

Increased use of the Internet has presented some unexpected challenges for local retailers, too. When the recession hit, consumers started shopping for the best price, and some turned to their smartphones to find it. With smartphone technology, customers can scan an item's UPC code to find out where the item is being sold (including online) and at what price. This allows them to buy the product at the lowest price. The practice, called showrooming, costs retailers money in lost sales as well as in damage to merchandise caused by shoppers' continuous examination of products.

Myers expects the impact of showrooming to decrease if the Market Fairness Act passes in the U.S. House of Representa-

tives. Also known as the Internet Sales Tax, the act, if it becomes law, would force ecommerce sites to collect sales tax in states where they do not have a physical presence. "That's going to level the playing field a little bit, in my mind."

Though local retailers have faced a host of challenges lately, many report sales increases over the last year, and Monahan insists business is on the upswing.

"I can tell you that from 2007 until the beginning of 2011, I had to keep a box of tissues on my desk. I don't anymore." ■

After 15 years away, Laura Hampton is happy to be back in Jacksonville pursuing her three passions: writing, tennis and beach bumming.



TIME TO TWEET

Are peak times for social media a shortcut to success?

Social media has become one of the best ways to get the public talking about your brand. Research has shown that "peak times" exist for businesses to post on social media sites—times when people are most likely to be browsing their news feeds.

For Facebook, that time is said to be between 9 AM and 4 PM ET. For Twitter, it's 1 to 3 PM. On Pinterest, Saturday morning is best. But consider all the variables before posting.

"It is immensely important that the content you are posting can 'cut through' all of the noise that is out there," says Kate Heller, a public relations and social media coordinator. "Keep your content fresh, fun, engaging and visually stimulating."

To do that, simply posting at a peak time isn't enough. Think about it: every other social media manager has heard about these times, too. Chances are, there is going to be even more noise than usual.

"Pictures, pictures, pictures," says Heller. "If you can't immediately pull a wandering eye in, you have very little chance of capturing and engaging a digital-age audience."

Lastly, consider that audience. Does your company market to 9-to-5ers, students or insomniacs? Peak times for your customers could be radically different.

"Complete research to determine the exact target market that [you] wish to reach—even within the 'social media users' market," Heller says. Facebook Insights offers tools to see who's getting your message and when.

The most important thing to remember with social media marketing is to use good judgment. There's no good way to talk about your local store's sale when the city is being hit with a tornado, and there's no magic time that will guarantee your message's success. ■ *by Jocelyn Tolbert*

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