

You have seen one of her shops earlier in the magazine (pages 22 & 23), now Rachel Parkin discusses what she believes to be the most important elements of modern retail

THE 10 COMMANDMENTS OF RETAIL

Most of us with shops work hard at it every day. Selecting product, making displays, enticing shoppers, creating ambience, and serving customers. It's more than a full time job - you never really switch off when you have your own business. The thing about this new reality is that it came about so fast, no one was really prepared.

The easiest thing to do is to react! Reacting is intuitive, instinctive and usually dangerous. Responding is a much better alternative. You respond to external stimuli with thoughtful action. Response is always better than reaction.

However, both pale in comparison to the third alternative: initiative. Taking the initiative and making something good out of any situation is always preferable to being a victim of a situation.

So with this in mind, I've been thinking about what are the most important elements of retail, because you can't bake a tasty cake if you don't deal with the ingredients in the right order. Here's the top ten:

1. Location, location, location.

If you don't have a good location, you'd better have a good marketing plan to compensate for this drawback. If you don't have an "A1" location (and how many of us can afford them) then you're going to have to work harder, much harder on your marketing. It's very possible for a small niche shop to be on a side street, supported by a niche market, but it's much harder for a general gift shop for example - unless you have a whiz bang website.

2. Define your niche!

Clarity is power. What's your USP? In this world of choice, it's very hard to restrict yourself to a narrow band of product, but that's essentially what we have to do, otherwise we're giving out a mixed message to the customers who then get confused.

3. Watch your costs.

This one is self-explanatory, but in reality

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when business is good and the market is buoyant, most of us don't really do this. Things in this category include break-even point, budgeting, finance, deals with suppliers, payment terms, bank terms, cost of sales, Return on Investment etc.

4. Branding & positioning.

Is your branding and marketing consistent? How are you communicating this to your customers, your staff and the world? Have you worked out your USP and are you utilising it at every opportunity? What's your message? What kind of local profile do you have? I'm a massive fan of local magazines and newspapers, they can do wonders for your image, they can tell your story, and telling your story and putting a face to the business brings customers in through the door. Local media are looking for stories all the time, so if you have a good "angle" for them, let them know.

5. Marketing.

There's a difference between the marketing and advertising. To be clear, marketing is the systematic planning, controlling and implementing of a mix of business activities that results in sales. Advertising is a piece of the marketing process - it's the piece that involves getting your message out to a wider audience. If you think of marketing as a trivial pursuit disc, then advertising is one piece of pie in the disc. Other pieces of pie will include public relations (PR) pricing, discount, sales strategy, customer service and community involvement.

6. Energise your staff!

Get them on board with what you have to do - there's nothing worse than grumpy staff who don't really want to be there. Make sure that yours are a credit to you - do they represent you and your shop well, and can they sell?

7. Websites.

Make sure that your website contains useful information about you, your business and what you're all about. Flesh it out - what charities do you support? What's your

vision for your shop? Introduce your staff. Why should people buy from you? Are your goods fairly traded?

8. Customer experience.

We are long past the idea of just taking the customer's money and dealing with the next in the queue. This is the age of the customer experience, and their expectations are now high. It is your job to interact with them on many levels.

It is not enough to meet customers' expectations - you have to exceed them. Take a moment to think about what would exceed your expectations in a shop you frequent, then go and implement something similar in your own business.

9. Sales - features & benefits.

Remember you are a sales professional. Either you have chosen this profession, or it has chosen you. Either way, you can't have a retail business and not like selling! If you're finding it harder, go back to school, get some books - there are literally hundreds on the market, and each day try to use a new technique, or master a new way of thinking about a part of the process. Not only will it make things more interesting for you, your brain loves it when you learn something new. You'll be doing something positive to make a difference in your sales.

10. Watch your market.

When things are not going so well, the temptation is to retreat to what you know - it feels safer. However, you don't get any marks for safety, you get marks for spotting new trends, new products and emerging markets, so try to make sure you do your research, online, at shows, or window shopping other businesses.

There are my ten commandments of retail - hopefully I have given lots of ideas to motivate you!

"People often say that motivation doesn't last. Well, neither does bathing - that's why we recommend it daily!" - Zig Ziglar.



Rachel Parkin