



SHOPTALK

By Margie Johnson



SETTING THE STAGE FOR 4TH QUARTER SALES

Shop Talk is a continuing series of consumer-oriented retail articles by Margie Johnson, president of Shop Talk, a retail consulting firm that specializes in showing organizations how to become leaders in their marketplaces and industries through customer-centered training. Over the past 15 years, Margie has worked in many Main Street towns throughout the nation. She is passionate about helping small business owners become more successful.

Clearly, retailers are aware that the success of fourth quarter sales in 2010 will depend on the momentum that they create in their stores. "Waiting for business to happen" isn't a strategy that will work in this economy. Retailers must "make business happen."

Currently, I am coaching retailers to think of their stores as a "stage" and their associates as the "cast." When they open those doors, it's "show-time!" Consumer research reports that merchants will be servicing a very practical customer in the fourth quarter of this year. My own research from consumers indicates an appetite for stores that create a sense of connection and rapport. They seek a store that expresses a sincere appreciation for their business and one that breaks the S-O-S cycle (Sea Of Sameness).

During the fourth quarter of 2010 – "the golden quarter" – I am challenging specialty retailers to create a strategic marketing plan that integrates a rhythm of events, contests, coupons, cause-related ties, and "no hassle" service. Get your Main Street retailers to make the shopping experience fun, memorable, and easy. Customers continue to say that shopping is so often stressful, a chore,

and time consuming. Retailers need to understand this perception, seek to reframe this thinking, and make their stores *enticing, engaging, educational, and entertaining!*

The following "punch list" contains ways that store owners can create low-budget, yet high-impact, marketing opportunities. Give this list to your retailers and suggest that they

select a few ideas that would be appropriate for their stores and that their clients would love to "buy into."

- First off, remember that today's greatest marketing opportunities are created by educated, enthusiastic sales associates who are eager to provide "solutions" for customers. Power up the sales team with a recommitment to serve excellence. Urge them to think of their roles as "solution providers and public relations agents." Turn your clients into advocates who can help sell your business. This is the key success strategy!
- Refresh the store's look for the holiday season. Create an overall theme, color palette, etc., to set a magical mood. Check out this website for fresh ideas – www.cosmoworlds.com/trends/christmasworld-trends_2009_2010. Also, if there is a design or interior decorating school nearby, it could be a great source of talent – the students can bring a fresh perspective.
- Use the Walt Disney approach in developing a seasonal strategy: "start with the end in sight." What do you want customers to be saying, feeling, experiencing? What will they say when they leave the store? "Hassle-free shopping" could include pre-wrapped items, wish lists, delivery, extended store hours, phone consultations, appointments, etc. Be creative.
- Make creative gift wrapping a marketing opportunity. Ask your paper supplier for examples of new, yet cost-effective, ways to add zing to your gift wrapping. Create a signature look that defines the business.
- Reach out to the corporate world and/or small business owners to sell gift certificates in bulk for a substantial discount, i.e., pre-sell \$50, \$75, or \$100 cards for 25 percent off. Make this a UVP (Unique Value Proposition). The \$50 gift card only costs the customer \$37.50, and it is personalized and gift wrapped in packaging that has a distinctive "WOW" factor. It's a win-win – no hassle, cost and time saving for the business owner, and a way to bring new clients into your store. Also, these gift cards are frequently redeemed for more than the full value; thus the effective markdown is less.
- Approach the fourth quarter as the "hospitality" quarter. Think of ways you can welcome customers and clients, such as providing refreshments, putting out chairs where shoppers or their companions can relax, and creating a play area for kids with games, DVDs, etc. Underline the "welcome and wanted" mentality that customers so rarely experience in stores today.
- Experiment with special promotions that can create a "buzz" in your town.
 - ◆ "Sleepless in _____(your town)." Have a pajama party, serve espresso, hire a limo to pick up customers and take them home with their gift packages all wrapped and ready. Consider giving away some teddy bears, soft throws, or small pillows. Let your creative side go wild with this concept. Have fun!
 - ◆ Select a cause, charity, or club and team up with them for an in-store event. Give a percentage of the sales to the charity, and use members of the group to "pre-sell" the event. Let them be assistants "on the floor." These types of events can raise awareness of both the charity and your business. Create pre-press releases, with photos – they are a key to success.

Among ways you can welcome customers is by creating an area where kids can play while their parents shop.





To get customers buzzing about your downtown businesses, encourage store owners to create special promotions such as a "Girls Night Out" (far left). Creating a sensory experience by offering refreshments customers can taste and smell, music they can hear, and products they can touch is another way to entice shoppers into stores.

◆ Pampered Patron Party or GNO (Girls Night Out). Invite your top clients for a night of shopping that includes some pampering. Hire a massage therapist for neck/shoulder massages, reflexologist to offer foot and leg pressure point release, hair stylist, make-up artist, or color analyst. Make it a night to remember. Often these practitioners will offer their services for free as a way to promote their businesses.

◆ On-line ways to excite customers include the following:

- ◆ Create a custom men's necktie or ladies' scarf with a logo or picture, at www.beta.gifts.com.
- ◆ Customize greeting cards at www.mycardmaker.com.
- ◆ Personalize postage stamps with a logo or picture at www.photo.stamps.com.
- ◆ Commission a humorous cartoon through www.andertoons.com.

• Examples of national days or months that can be used to create in-store events or promotions:

October 15	National Grouch Day
October 23	Mother-in-Law Day
November 20	Make-A-Wish Day
November 21	World Hello Day
December 12	Poinsettia Day
December 31	Make-Up-Your-Mind Day
January	Customer Appreciation Month

* For an expanded version of this calendar of events, please e-mail shoptalk@shoptalk.org.

Ideas for Store Interiors

• Let creative signage be your silent salesperson. Find ways to communicate product stories, unique uses, origin of product, something whimsical, etc. Ask someone who does calligraphy to create small signs

that can be displayed in frames or on small easels. It's fun to watch the customer's reaction and it's a great way to start a dialogue.

- Give all sales associates business cards and have them write on the back, "I'll be pleased to assist you in the future. Thanks. Signed _____." This is a great way to connect with a customer who says "I'll be back."
- During this holiday season or any season, make sure your restroom facilities are client-ready. Don't let a customer leave your store because you don't have a public restroom. Regardless of the age, condition, etc., if it works, let them use it. Hold a contest to come up with creative ways to enhance these facilities. Staff will love it and customers will be grateful.
- Create price-point groupings for items under \$10 and products ranging from \$10-25. Make the display attractive and pre-wrap several of each item. "Grab and go" will be extremely popular this holiday season.
- Create sensory experiences: *smell* cookies baking, apple cider warming, vanilla candles burning; *see* a vast assortment of products that are well displayed; *hear* the local string quartet or harpist; encourage customers to *touch and handle* products; and *try on* items. *Taste* the goodies that are out on the counters. Appeal to all the senses. Vendors will often supply products for sampling free of charge.
- Offer a "Grand Giveaway" valued at \$500. Seek support for this promotion from your top vendors and get a complementary business to sell you their product at a discount and vice versa. Put this together in a gorgeous presentation. Invite custom-

ers to start registering on December 1st. They can register each time they make a purchase. Vendors are quite willing to support this type of marketing – just give their brand credit. Be sure and e-mail customers about the Grand Giveaway to entice them to your store.

- Reach out to your Facebook fans with special "daily deals." This easy-to-implement marketing can pay big dividends with very little cost. If you don't have a business Facebook page, ask a marketing student from a nearby college to assist you. Creating raving fans that power word-of-mouth advertising is easy with social media.

Unleash your creativity, involve your staff, and look for ways to enhance the experiences customers can have in your store this fourth quarter. Today's consumers have reset the expectation bar, with the convergence of new technologies (apps for everything), their lust for instant gratification, and their thirst for new experiences. With these higher expectations, retailers are being squeezed to think in "real time" about ways they can adapt their business model to attract and retain this new consumer. In short, my advice is to be very, very proactive and create a marketing calendar to entice customers and entertain them.

"Set the Stage! Lights, Camera, Action!"

Great retailing to you!
Margie Johnson

Margie Johnson is an Allied Member of the National Main Street network. Learn more about Margie and Shop Talk at http://al-liedirectory.mainstreet.org/listing/margie_johnson.html. She can also be reached at 757-491-1411, by e-mail at shoptalk@shoptalk.org, or by visiting her website, <http://www.shoptalk.org>.