

Strike back at Amazon

Strategies to drive consumers off the web and back into stores

→ **THE INDUSTRY NEEDS** service innovation to draw customers back into stores and avoid becoming showrooms for competing online outlets, said Craig LaRosa, a principal with design and innovation firm Continuum, in his Wednesday OIA Outdoor University presentation, “Six Strategies for Stealing Customers Away from Amazon.”

Price-oriented strategies are not the answer, LaRosa said. The focus should be on bottom-up, customer-centered innovation that improves the customer experience and increases convenience.

“Convenience trumps price,” LaRosa said “It may be cheaper on Amazon, but if the store is more convenient, they won’t go online.”

LaRosa outlined tactics to create “brand evangelists,” customers who enthusiastically support the brand, store or service and become word-of-mouth advertisers and repeat shoppers.

Empower and educate employees

because they are your largest asset, LaRosa said. “Employees are the tip of your brand spear. They’re the best tool in your toolbox for creating brand evangelists.”

LaRosa stressed “turning the store into an experience,” a place where customers come for entertainment or a unique atmosphere, not just to buy products. He cited the success of Bass Pro Shops’ shopping experience, which attracts more tourists in the state of Missouri than the Gateway Arch or Budweiser Brewery.

LaRosa wrapped up the seminar by advising attendees to break down

internal boundaries and work together as an organization. Customers have little patience with hiccups between online, in-store and telephone service.

Larry Plumier, a former senior manager at Amazon and CEO of Indigitous, a digital consulting agency, had a different take. “The biggest thing supporting online versus brick-and-mortar is selection,” he said.

Amazon is aggressive, Plumier said. If they carry everything, customers won’t need to go anywhere else.

At large retail stores like REI and Eastern Mountain Sports, sales associates can place orders from their

websites on behalf of customers. These “special orders” help retailers leverage an online component that improves their in-store selection.

Plumier believes that the tools for smaller specialty retailers to expand their selection through online suppliers don’t yet exist, though he expects them to develop within the next three years.

Marrying traditional approaches like customer loyalty programs with technology is critical, said Jennifer Mull, owner of Backwoods. “We have to be innovative as retailers,” Mull said.

One of these innovations was a mixed-media contest where participants submitted photos online and also came into Backwoods store locations to participate in gear reviews and other activities.

“It’s so basic,” said Mull of bringing technology into stores. “But that small step has opened that door for us.”

--CASEY FLYNN

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--CRAIG LAROSA, PRINCIPAL, CONTINUUM