

ARTICLE REPRINT

FROM THE

MAXIMUM Customer Experience BLOG

Improve Your Customer Experience to Increase the Bottom Line!

 **Little Guitars and MCE**
BY KELLY ERICKSON

Señorita, I'm in trouble again

What do you do when you're at the very beginning of a new hobby, a major purchase, or even a new direction for your business?

If you're like me, you start with a little homework.

Now these days I'll bet that you, my loyal and web-savvy reader, start that homework right here on the www. So do I, but for some things it doesn't take more than a few minutes to realize the medium is inadequate.

Looking for a new sofa? You'll probably want to sit on it.

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A new pair of shoes? Unless you're familiar with the brand you may well want to try it on (sorry, [Zappos](#)) before deciding.

To choose an accountant, to rent a new retail space, to hire a chef, you're going to wind up having face-to-faces with folks fairly quickly.

And if your daughter has decided to take up her first musical instrument, and it's one you've never played...

Well, you may need that same high-touch experience. Though I learned a bit about what might interest us and what price range to expect (woosh...) on the Internet, I needed to see guitars, hold guitars, and hear guitars, to see if at her total beginner level we'd care about whether we got a \$150 guitar or a \$500 guitar.

I can see you don't know which way to turn

And there, dear reader, begins today's tale. Having learned that guitars are priced from oh! to ai-yi-yi, I grabbed the addresses of the music stores near us and set out on tour. At each venue I walked in and played the same tune to open:

“Hi, I'm at the very beginning stages of looking into this. I don't know anything about guitars. *confiding smile* My daughter really wants to play acoustic guitar. I'd like to know what she should get started with and what kind of costs, maintenance... um... anything I should know at all, I guess. We have someone who's going to teach her the very beginning stuff but I'd like to know about your classes for when she outgrows that, too.”

Shop #1: I'm hurting long before I fly

Confession. I'm not into music shops. As in, I haven't stepped into one since I left my clarinet behind ages (and several states) ago. So I had no idea what I'd find in the shops I'd mapped out, but #1 seemed promising. The Kid's school always talks about the place. The store is large, it's well-laid-out, very dark, but with a nice traffic flow through different instruments and specialty areas, all in their own intimate nooks. Considering I'm here just past lunchtime on a weekday, I'm surprised at how many customers there are in the store. I guess I just don't get it, eh? It's as busy as any other store would be in the early afternoon. Somehow I'm surprised.

The size of the place is a bit overwhelming, but I'll have a look around before I bug someone with my planned intro. As I do, I see a range of prices in drums (something else The Kid was considering, before the size of our apartment and the sentiments of the neighbors was brought up), brass, woodwinds... a huge sheet music area, soundproofed practice or lesson areas that look oh-so-professional... finally, the guitar section. Where the prices range from \$1599 up to \$4500.

I get the feeling we're not in Kansas anymore, Toto.

I back out of this section and look for the "hey, cheapos" section. Not another guitar in sight. Feeling embarrassed, I go to the counter, wait in line, and start my spiel to the guy at the counter.

"Oh, no problem. You want our beginner kit, it goes for \$159 and has everything you need..." [lists off a bunch of stuff I didn't know I needed]

Okay, that price is more in line with what I thought a beginner would want. Can I see it?

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"No, unfortunately we're out. They're on order though. Hang on. [yells to office a few feet away] Do you know when that order's coming in? With the kits?"

"No. No clue. If she wants one, she should order one."

"Um, he says..."

I heard him. Do they carry anything mid-range? I might want to consider something that will last her a bit longer... Not in the store. They can order things, though, if I know what I want, which of course, is what I'm in the store to determine. This isn't too useful, so I ask about lessons. Could you write me something out, or do you have a price list, something about your teachers and their lesson times?

"No. We have a book. [points behind the counter] You just look in it..."

I have to come around behind their counter and stare in their book while they stare at me, staring, not knowing what I want, not able to think about it on my own time? I sigh. I'll keep it in mind, I say.

"Do you want to order that kit? That way it'll definitely come in."

Well, without seeing it, or hearing it, and not knowing a thing about guitars? No. I'll check back. Maybe you'll get it back in stock before I've made a decision.

I leave, almost none-the-wiser, and wishing I'd left before I bothered talking to him. I'm feeling poorer, stupider, and much more discouraged than when I entered the shop.

Shop #2: You turn your eyes from me

Shop #2 has such a beautiful layout I'm encouraged. The place is bright and friendly looking and though I can't see a price tag anywhere, there are little clues in the placement of the guitars and even the music displayed near them that tell me beginner from advanced, and hey! there do seem to be beginning instruments available. In fact there is an enormous selection, maybe thirty or more guitars on display. I can get just about anything I want here, if only I knew anything about what I wanted. Super!

Now I just have to find some help...

Unlike in shop #1, there are no customers here. I was feeling so cheered by the beautifully-executed interiors, that it took me about five minutes to notice.

The next thing I notice is there is also no staff.

In a back room I can see a lady on the telephone. She looks up at me and seems to smile vaguely. After a minute of trying to smile back with "how about some help" eyes, I realize the vague smile is for the phone conversation she's having, not for me. She spends the next 2 minutes staring at her desk, tapping with a pencil in a jazzy rat-a-tat-tat.

She may still be tapping now, for all I know. I'm here to hand over money, and once again I'm being turned down—but far more rudely. Two minutes is my limit. I walk out.

Shop #3 (why is it always the last one?): You're exactly what the doctor ordered

I'm on one of the main drags north of Wilmington, trying to find this blasted shop, wondering how anyone gets started if folks are so determined to make this experience a misery. I'm wondering, too, how bad it would be to simply order something sight unseen from the web, if I really did my research. As a dedicated believer in supporting local stores I'm sad that I can't find anyone I'd enjoy giving my money to, and now, I just can't find this place at all.

Finally, here it is, behind a few other shops, squished in a small building with three more businesses, its simple, aging signage dwarfed by all the visual noise on this thoroughfare. I pull in and wonder if my car will get hit when other folks try to move in the tiny lot. As I walk up to the steps leading into the building, I get a pull in the wool of my suit from a thorn on a plant I brush by. With a sigh of resignation I push the door open, expecting little.

And little is what I get. One lady, two itchy-bitsy rooms, crammed to the rafters with instruments and sheet music and goodness-knows what-all, and not twelve inches to walk anywhere in the shop. Unbelievably there is another customer somehow shoehorned into the place, so I make an attempt at looking around while I wait.

They're talking like they're old friends, the owner and the customer, though it's clear from the conversation that this customer has never been in here before. They're relaxed and laughing and the owner (who has waved to

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me now, and held up one finger to optimistically suggest I may only be waiting a minute) is taking her time, explaining everything about the instrument being considered, answering every question generously.

Listening in, I begin to relax. I can't really walk far enough to see the whole place (my daughter's bedroom is orderly compared to this), so I stare into space, admiring the five guitars on the wall. Not much choice, but I don't need much choice.

I make up my mind to give this store my money.

When Tracy walks out (yes, I listened in that closely, I had no choice), happy with her new saxophone, the owner beams at me, bounds right over as if the aisles are six feet wide, and walks me through everything a mama could need to know, from size to construction to steel-vs.-nylon strings and keeping The Kid's fingers clean.

So the strings will last longer, I nod, thinking I'm catching on.

"Well, maybe it does that," she says, "but really dirt on the strings just makes the notes sound dull. So tell her to keep her fingers clean if she wants it to sound good!"

Keep it in a garbage bag and save money on a case. Keeps the dust off, as long as your kid's a careful one you're fine. You won't wear strings out as fast as people say you will, not at first. She shows me two beginner guitars and upsells me thirty bucks with ease. When I was worried about hundreds and she can explain how thirty can make the guitar sound better, why argue?

Last, she won't let me buy me a guitar today—and that's when I am really sold.

"Bring her back," she says, handing me the plainest business card I've seen in a decade, "and let her feel what it's like before you commit to it. We'll set you up then. If she loves it, this is a long-term thing, you know."

Bringing her back to involve her in the decision was my plan all along, and the fact that the owner's just read my mind and made a decision based purely on satisfying the real customer—The Kid—rather than the one with a wallet—astounds me.

"Feel free to check out the other two stores near here, and make sure you two have found the right instrument," says the owner as we chat before I back out of the nook I'm crunched into, to head past the thorns to my car. "How we all look at it is this. If another person becomes a musician, no matter whose store they begin at, we raise the level of water in the pool for everyone. You'll get lessons in one place, strings someplace else, music wherever... What we all want is more musicians in Delaware. We don't care who starts 'em, let's just get 'em started!"

Having just come from those other two stores, I know too well that this is NOT how they *all* look at it. But lordy, I'm glad she does.

A 1, 2—and a 1, 2, 3, 4!

1. Maximum Customer Experience can definitely be about satisfying a high-end customer. Maybe that's what shop #1 really wants to do, though I'm honestly not sure. They do cater to the school-band-rental crowd, for instance, which

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seems to go against a high-end image. If that is what they want, they aren't communicating that well, except in being rather unhelpful to and uninterested in a newbie.

You can do it. But **if you want to say “this shop's not for you” to some people, you've got to be clear in your message.**

2. MCE can set a mood (and if it's really Maximum, it will); your web site or physical location can be darkly rock-and-roll professional, like the first shop, or laid out beautifully and simply, almost like an art gallery, as the second place was, or you can invoke a hundred other moods. **Know what you're going for and follow through in all design elements**, from the practice rooms to—ahem!—your printed materials. No printed materials so I can walk away and make this big decision? What was shop #1 thinking of?
3. I'm a big believer in price tags (physically, or on your website), and if shop #2 had had some, maybe I would have waited around longer and educated myself a bit more. (Maybe three minutes. Which still wouldn't have been enough....)
Your prospects come to you more educated than ever these days. Don't be afraid to give them all the information they'll need to choose you.
4. There is no getting around it—**the critical element of Maximum Customer Experience will always be the human element.** It's been said a thousand times because it's true:
People buy from people.

Yes, it will always come down to that. I'm buying from a knowledgeable, helpful, patient, friendly person, who cared more about “raising the level of water in the pool for everyone” (got to love that metaphor) than about capturing dollars.

The funny thing is, there are few better ways for a small business to capture dollars than by thinking in exactly that way.

Did you notice there's exceptions to the rules?

Yes. I'm buying in spite of an awful location, lousy graphics, and the worst "traffic flow" I've ever seen outside of a basement crawl space.

So make sure your people are available, make sure they know their stuff, and make sure they are always, 100% focused, on what it would be like to be on the other side of the counter. Make sure they smile. Make sure they deliver delight. Even if that's the only rule you follow, follow that rule slavishly.

By the way, the answer to "Why is it always the last one," of course, is that when you've found what you need, you stop looking. (Hope you find the ideas you were looking for here today.)

Something to think about: Are there other ways for a shop to make the sale when you're learning about a purchase that's completely foreign to you?

Grow and be well,

Kelly Erickson

(With apologies to the brothers Van Halen. Ooo-oooh-oooo-oooh.)

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About VisionPoints, The Experience Designers

We're the small-business Experience Design company that saves you *big* frustration making *little* efforts that go *nowhere*. We're experts in **Experience audits and website user testing, put together with strategic positioning, compelling content, and design solutions** so you can grow your business.

Whether you're a traditional "bricks-and-mortar" company or a business operating solely on the Internet, we at VisionPoints want to help you increase sales and word-of-mouth. These days, "good enough" customer experience is everywhere and your customer knows it. We'll help you go beyond just making a sale, to making Maximum Customer Experience to encourage future sales and power you forward.

About Kelly Erickson, Owner, Creative Director

"Can remarkable—Maximum—Customer Experience save your business? You bet! Through my blog, [Maximum Customer Experience](#), one of the longest-running sources for great Customer Experience tips and strategies, and my work with clients at [VisionPoints](#), I help plan the changes that make marketing to and connecting with your customers easier than ever before. If you're under pressure to make this the best year ever (who isn't?), I'd love to talk with you to find the solution for your small biz."

Kelly is the author of the well-respected Maximum Customer Experience Blog, an AdAge Power 150 blog and one of the longest running sources for great Customer Experience tips and strategies on the web. She has an absolute passion for helping other business owners and leaders to Go Where Your VisionPoints.

To contact us about helping your company to grow, please [click here](#).

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