

Selling Cameras in the Internet Age

I prefer to shop in local "mom & pop" stores. That way, at least a part of my money stays in the local economy, and it maintains the nice-to-have services in the neighborhood. However, I'm neither rich enough nor altruistic enough to do this at any price. A well-run Internet mail-order company can undercut the mom & pop operation in price, at least somewhat, so to have my hard-earned, the local stores will have to find other ways to compete. With a few exceptions, they've failed.

I've decided that the mom & pop premium that I'm willing to pay, compared to ordering my stuff from, say, Germany, is between 10% and 20%, after factoring in all expenses like shipping and handling and so on -- more in per cent for the little stuff, less for the big stuff. However, to get the dough, the moms and pops have to make it worth it. I expect to be treated fairly, to have my (reasonable) questions answered, and especially to have the knowledge that if I have a problem, for example with a warranty issue, that they will help me take care of it. Since the little stores can't compete with price, they will have to do it with service. Making claims on my moral sense alone won't do it.

Shopping should be fun!

Over the past year or so, I've shopped for photo stuff at a number of places, some local and small, some local and bigger, some international and small, and some international and big. I've spent more money on cameras and film than I like to admit, even to myself.

Here's a rough breakdown of my experiences:

1. At one place, I had to write a letter to the chain's owner to get the sales personnel to stick to what they had promised me to get me to put my name on a waiting list. Later, they demonstrated an utter indifference to a minor warranty issue that I had with my camera -- they didn't even bother to give me the coordinates of the manufacturer's service partner, until I explicitly asked. I'm not going there again.
2. At another, everything went more or less OK, until I had a problem, after which I was treated so rudely that I never want to do business with the place again -- although, after a bout of arm-twisting, the concrete problem was solved to my satisfaction.
3. In one case, we had already agreed on a purchase over e-mail, and that I'd swing by his photography studio-cum-camera-store to pick it up. However, the store-studio didn't have fixed opening hours, and the store-owner refused to make an appointment by e-mail: he insisted that I phone beforehand to see if he happens to be in, saying that his schedule was too busy to make appointments. I tried explaining that I'm not entirely master of my own time either, and ended up buying the several-hundred-Euro item elsewhere (locally) for less.
4. At another, an item that I had ordered turned out not to be available, but nobody bothered to inform me, my order was held up for the time, and it took several inquiries to find a way to change my order.
5. At one more place, I got expert advice and professional service. I was interested in an item which was not yet available, and we made an appointment so I could come examine it when they did. The item

didn't arrive, and the shopkeeper forgot to inform me about it. I ended up not buying anything.

6. At yet another place, I got friendly and personal service, including an offer to exchange an item I had ordered that wasn't in stock with one that was. I've bought two pretty expensive items from them so far.
7. At yet another place, I placed my order as instructed, and got contacted the next day with information that the mode of payment I had selected was not available, could I please select another one. (This one's an open issue at this writing.)
8. At two places, everything worked precisely and efficiently, with little personal interaction whatsoever. In one of them, the price was ridiculously high, but I needed the item so I bought it anyway.
9. At three others, an inquiry about a very slightly unusual item resulted in an exorbitant asking price and a clear unwillingness to sell me anything, or go through the trouble of ordering it -- not without cash up front, anyway.
10. In only one place I have gotten consistently excellent, personal service, the staff have been happy to chat and help even with slightly bizarre problems, and have gone out of their way to sort out any minor issues I may have run across.

In other words, three complete customer-service disasters that utterly turned me off to the establishments in question, six minor bureaucratic screw-ups or instances of general unwillingness to sell me anything, two effective, successful, and impersonal experiences, one instance of unusually good, personal customer service, and only one instance of really beyond-the-call-of-duty service.

I won't name any of the places that screwed up -- after all, it could just be that I'm a nasty customer with unreasonable demands (although reading on the DPReview forums about people on their seventh 10D camera body, I'm not so sure). I will, however, name the two that left me with a very good feeling.

One is New York Camera, a smallish German WWW retailer. These guys actually phoned me up from Germany, with their native English-speaking customer rep, to sort out the details of my order.

UPDATE: *RIP New York Camera. They went out of business, and I'm sorry to say in a nasty way too, leaving a whole bunch of people in the lurch. In fact, I've just found out that the owner is being investigated for criminal conduct in the affair. I'm sorry if my recommendation caused you to get into trouble with them. If that's the case, here's the contact information of the people handling the situation:*

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The other is TeMaFoto, a mom & pop store in Helsinki, at the corner of Malminrinne and Lapinlahdenkatu. They've always been able to handle even slightly unusual requests (for example, pro lab type services like push-processing or roll film). If they can't do it themselves, they're happy to direct me somewhere that can. Plus, the family that runs it is super-nice. That's the place I always ask first, nowadays. If only everybody treated their customers like they do!

The point being...?

I understand that small, local camera and photo stores feel threatened by Internet shopping, eBay, and the like. However, being rude about it doesn't help. At least on one occasion, I asked to examine a camera, only to be told that "I know your kind, you come here to waste our time about it, mess up our goods, and then order it on the cheap off the Internet." Thank-you and good-bye.

This is a really stupid approach. I wasn't, in fact, about to buy that camera -- I was just curious. But if I had been, I would have looked to buy it locally first, and only if I could not get a reasonable price or

reasonable availability, would I have looked abroad. (In fact, of the five cameras currently in the family stable, three have been bought locally, one has been bought over the Internet, and one was inherited from my grandfather, with an approximately similar ratio for lenses; there's one other camera and accessories that I had bought locally but recently sold.) If the place had treated me differently, I would very likely have asked them when I was shopping for my 10D, for example.

There must be a better way. I would hate to see the mom & pop stores be out-competed by the Technikdirekts of the world.

Some free advice

Most of the local camera stores appear to have forgotten, or never to have understood, some fundamental points of photographer character. So, here's a quick reminder, or a primer, with some tips on how to sell us expensive stuff.

Photographers buy on feel

Tip 1: Keep demo units of all stuff with a cool factor available, and *ask* your customers to feel them, handle them, take pictures with them -- keep a stock of those stupid 16 MB CF's handy in case they want to grab a few samples, with the understanding that they'll bring the card back. If they don't, chalk it up as marketing expenses... but it will make them feel obligated, and chances are that they will bring it back, and come back to make the purchase.

Photographers work (or play) with their instruments, and develop a highly personal relationship with them. They may be sold on the specs, but what really moves the stuff is the feel. When I was shopping for an SLR-like digicam, I was really, really taken by the sheer feel and handling of the Olympus E-10/E-20. It was painful to go for the Minolta D7i in the end -- and in the end, I'm happy I did, because it did suit my needs better. You can't handle stuff in mail-order places. In mom & pop stores, you can. I was this close to walking out the store with an E-20 five minutes after the owner handed me his. Apart from cyclists, I know of no other group with generally as little money and as much willingness to spend all of it on stuff that's really way better than they need.

Photographers are protective

Tip 2: Photographers want to feel safe about their purchase. They dislike the idea of investing a big chunk of money in a piece of machinery, and being left out in the cold if something goes wrong. They're extremely suspicious of the manufacturers. Show a willingness to take care of them -- handle stuff with the importer, talk to the warranty repair people, and so on -- and you'll make them feel secure. This "insurance factor" alone is worth a fair chunk of extra price for a good many people.

Photographers are impatient

Tip 3: Photographers want their new toys *now*. The difference between walking out of the store with the widget under your arm and waiting a week for it to be delivered (with no certainty as to when it'll arrive) is worth another fair chunk of extra price. Try to keep stuff available *now* -- especially the kind of stuff that doesn't depreciate (much), like lenses, tripods, remote releases, eyepiece adapters, filters, and so on. "We don't have it, and we don't know when we can get it" is a certain sign for the prospective buyer to walk out the door.

Photographers are vain and touchy

Tip 4: Keep your opinions to yourself. The problem with many camera store owners is that they're enthusiasts themselves. A shop owner who's a Nikonian must at all costs not let this show, lest the customer be a Canonian. You may think the customer is a joker, a point-and-shooter, a wannabe, a digital nerd who doesn't understand the first thing about *real* photography, or whatever -- but if you treat him as

if he were Ernst Haas reborn, he'll follow you around like a puppy. If the shop-owner tells me "Yeah, we got those, but they're kinda expensive," and looks at me pityingly, I get another of those "thank-you and good-bye" moments.

Yep, that's happened too -- that was at the place that ended up with the second complete customer relations disaster... and with this place, I know for a fact that it's not just me: a friend of mine who's spent nearly all of his disposable income on vintage movie cameras, film, and processing, went there to ask about a Super-8, and got treated exactly the same way. Needless to say, he didn't end up buying anything. Man, I'll be glad to see that place go belly-up.

UPDATE: I just noticed that the place has had to move to smaller premises. Hah! The sad thing, though, is that the same fate has befallen my favorite camera store. Perhaps there is no justice in camera retail...

Photographers love to talk camera

Tip 5: Know your stuff. Invest time into becoming really familiar with all the major items you sell. Pare down the selection, if that's what it takes to keep your inventory from going stale, but be prepared to show off the stuff, chat about it, and show that you're interested in it yourself. That way, if you don't have the precise model the prospective buyer was asking for, you can at least make an educated suggestion and not seem like you're just pushing stuff on him because it happens to be on the shelf.

Please, let me buy something!

I don't know if my demands or wishes are unreasonable. If they are... too bad. I've all but given up on the moms and the pops, except for that one store that I really like. Film is on the way out, and they will lose their source of steady income -- developing pictures. They will have to adjust, or die. I wouldn't be happy to see them go (well, with one exception). I'm going to keep trying, even though there are a couple of places I'll take care to avoid. I really hope at least some of them wise up. It shouldn't be too difficult. If all else fails, they can ask the folks at TeMaFoto for advice.

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