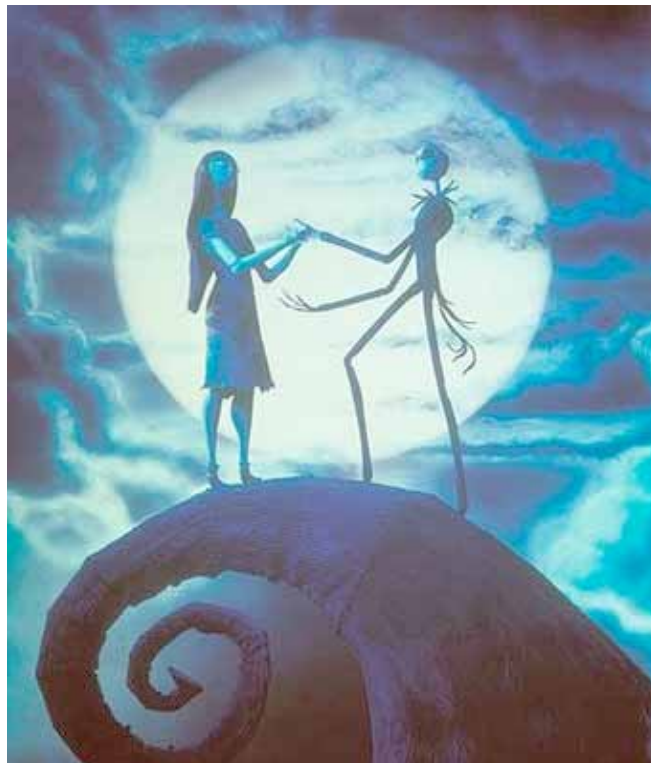




'Tis the Season to ... become a Retailer's Nightmare?

By William Ho, Executive Coach & Trainer @ Progress-U Limited



If you are working in the retail industry, this will be the busiest time of the year for you: the season's ending month, with the New Year – and most of the Asians will have 2 New Years to celebrate - just around the corner. Some of the retailers' life and death depends on this time. It is the "make it or break it" time.

By the way, if you are not in retail, still consider reading this article, there might be some good lessons to learn for your business, too.

Ah yes! We are still in the recession, and customers are still watching more carefully than usual how they spend their money. And no doubt, even if we were in the best of time, or the worst of time, retailers of all shapes and sizes, are always facing the challenge of not becoming just a me-too corner store, chain store, mega store, or any store. Most try to build their businesses around quality, service, solution, and fashion, rather than price only. The battleground apparently has shifted, as most of the retailers have felt extraordinary pressure on both price points and margin. Customers have not stopped spending, even in the worst of time, but they have certainly become more discriminating about how they spend their money.

The school of thought for the very best specialty retailing has always been developed around the specific customer's lifestyle, aspiration and passions. Retailers have started with products and catalogs, and then build a customer base for their merchandise. Especially for those mega chain stores, they have built up what we call a CRM – Customer Relation Management, where they become focused not on themselves; their products, their merchandise, but on their relationship with their customers. The success equation must begin with the centerpiece, a.k.a. their customers, and only then can they seek to build compelling and attractive assortments, service, solutions or fashion, that at the end appeal to their customers - those who eventually pay.

Small retailers, grandma stores, the corner stores, the town-centre types of stores knew about this a long time ago. These retailers basically knew every customer by his or her first name, and even his or her pets' names. These retailers knew where their customers' kids went to school, what they liked, their habits, their tastes, their favorite TV programs, and so on. These retailers knew what they have bought, when they bought, why they bought, how they bought, and so on. These retailers also knew why they were not buying from them, and what they were getting from their competitors.

And they chatted with their customers at all times, with sincerity and care - just like chatting with old friends - even if they were NOT buying anything from them.

And yes, that was how they built up the relationship; their trust.

In the old days, they did not have sophisticated I.T. systems to help them to remember things; they remembered with their hearts, because they cared about everyone.

These retailers had the passion to keep doing this consistently, because they knew that's how you won business. You won the business because you earned the trust; you earned the right to fulfill their need; you earned the right to keep doing this; without actually selling.

Stop Selling!

Today, your passion must become the life-force of your business. From this starting point, you will need to rethink your relationships with your customers, the roles and skill-sets of your employees, your concept of what makes your retail store compelling, your merchandising strategy, even your mission statement. It requires an intensity of focus that will define as well as differentiate you from the rest – those that might be much bigger than you.

Today, these trusted relationships will drive your growth organically. Your best customers will lead you to your next customers. Your most productive marketing initiatives will energize your best customers to bring their network of friends into the fold, through referral programs, trunk shows and invitation-only special events, for instance. The intent is not on building a broad customers base, it's on nurturing a passionate customer base.

And yes, this Holiday Season is likely to be a nightmare for some retailers – those that are still trying to find those customers without a solid idea of who and where they are, how they behave and why they behave that way, and what their buying motives are.

And yes, this Holiday Season might turn out to be the happiest moment for some retailers – if they have done their homework.

Closing the deal actually starts long before the selling even begins, and the Holiday Season starts every day.

Enjoy the moment!

----- **End of Article** -----



William is a senior veteran in the business world, also helped to attract and confirm investors to set up overseas companies; and was involved in a few merger and acquisitions throughout his career. He earned his stripes through his practical experience in the actual market.

He is keen to help and coach companies to explore their own potential, understand their core competence, and ride through the adversity of the economy. He is especially interested in situation where companies have to deal with constant changes, new market developments, multicultural environments, fierce competitions, and leadership development, particularly in sales. His expertise lies in building and managing sales and marketing teams, key account management, tactical negotiation and closing deals, forming alliances and partnerships through training and coaching within the organization to develop a sales- and subsequently results-oriented culture.