



**OUTSIDE
THE Vines**

INSPIRATION FROM BEYOND THE POTTING BENCH

Customer Service is Key

By Ana Olvera

Independent retailers constantly search for what will set them apart from big box stores as well as other retailers. The answer is sometimes as simple as providing great customer service, says Peter Berman, owner of pet supply store Rock Dog and Cat.

"The real key to the success of my store is customer service," Berman says. "It definitely sounds like a cliché but it's not."

A quick skim of the customer comments on the Yelp page for the Eagle Rock, California-based store shows the customers agree.

"You'll notice most of the comments are about the staff, and how [customers] are helped and the attention they get," Berman says. "When customers get treated the right way and like they matter, I think they notice."

"If you came into my store more than once, we would remember your name. It's about building relationships, and I don't mean in an insincere or phony way. It's nice that someone remembers something about you. I think people even appreciate that we remember your name."

All in the Employees

That customer service begins with having the right staff and implementing the right training so that employees follow through on expectations for great customer service.

The right employee will be passionate about your customer base and the products you sell, Berman says. In addition, he looks for employees that are personable and interested in learning — about the products and their furry customers.

To help his employees provide superior customer service, Berman says he tries to create and keep an environment that will encourage employees to be friendly and allow them to develop relationships with the store's customers.

"I think building relationships with people is as important as anything else that can happen at my store," Berman explains. "It's honestly like a bar or restaurant where you remember your regulars. My staff and I, when customers come in we start grabbing the food we know they always buy."

One initiative Berman has implemented is allowing his employees to bring their pets with them to work whenever they want. Customers bring their dogs and cats into the store as well, and it becomes a talking point and a way for employees to learn more about their customers.



The Rock Dog and Cat Instagram page (shown at right) also shares photos of the store's furry (and in some cases hairless) customers that come in and pets of employees that may be hanging out in the store.

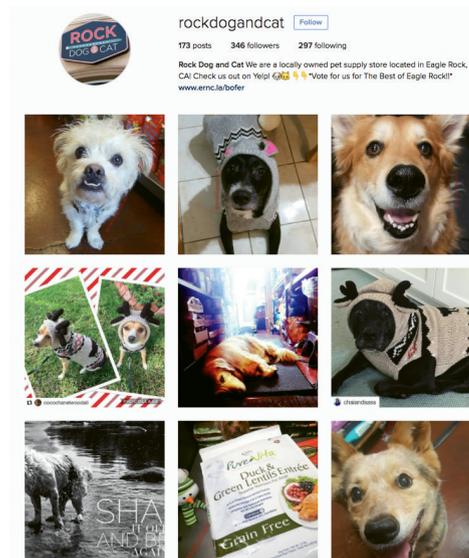
A Local Connection

Berman understands the needs of his Eagle Rock community and he tries to make himself and his store as accessible as possible.

"People here want to shop local, and I want to make it as easy as possible to become a customer," Berman says.

Additional services such as special orders and delivery help Rock Dog and Cat reach customers that might have gone to a big box store or online instead. The store doesn't do business online, but Berman says his relationship with distributors allows him the ability to do special orders for his customers.

"I don't have room to carry every possible item, but if you came in to my store and you wanted a product that I don't carry, I would get that for you," he says. After a customer places a special order, "we'll wait about a week and reorder it so that the next time you come in it's already here."



Berman says about an average of 40 to 50 customers make purchases this way.

Rock Dog and Cat's delivery service is another way of making his products accessible, he says.

"In general I really try to make it easy to be a customer," Berman says. "If all things are equal everywhere, what's going to set you apart? That's what sets us apart." **LGR**