



The Write Way

By Abby Kleckler

On a daily basis consumers' email inboxes are inundated with messages from stores offering massive discounts. As a result, small businesses in any industry are forced to get creative in order to compete. Offering unique products is crucial, but creativity goes beyond just stock.

"If we don't have great product, people aren't going to be coming in in the first place. That's a no-brainer," says Kate Strzok, owner of Broadway Paper in Milwaukee, Wis. "Good product: check. And then all the other things such as staffing and experience are also checked off but are sometimes harder to achieve."

Broadway Paper, which opened in 1988, has a long history of selling stationery, gift packaging and ribbon in Milwaukee's Historic Third Ward. Since Strzok took over the business in 2009, she says every year has gotten easier and more profitable.

Rewarding customers, emphasizing customer service and expanding gift selections have all played a role in the increased profits.

Rewards Without Discounts

"It's a struggle for a smaller business to compete against the idea that there's always a discount, always a deal," Strzok says. "I can't afford to give those discounts, so I try to think of other ways to reward and give back to our customers."

These rewards often come in the form of interactive experiences for customers or partnerships with other businesses.

One of the most popular programs at Broadway Paper is Letters to Santa. This is when kids come in and write letters on stationery. Staff members

then read the letters, write a response back and send them to the Postmaster General to postmark them from the North Pole.

"When someone's thinking of where they should go to look for gifts or buy gift wrap or whatever it is, hopefully they're going to remember their kids wrote a letter to Santa here and got an amazing response," Strzok says. "Something will click for them."

A calligrapher will pen the name or address of the recipient when a customer purchases a card around Valentine's Day, while the store's partnerships with local coffee shops or cupcake companies sometimes provides a sweet surprise for shoppers.

Service With a Story

The staff at Broadway Paper makes it a point to get to know their customers, but they also want customers to know about the staff, creating a family atmosphere.

A quick look at the company's website includes a photo of staff members and information such as their favorite colors or favorite Milwaukee restaurants. A wall in the shop features some of the staff's top picks.

"Certainly staffing is always a challenge, but I have had good luck in that department," Strzok says. "Everyone working here is happy and always smiling, and that's sometimes more than I can say for other stores I go to."

Friendly and knowledgeable staff is key to providing the customized services customers have come to expect from Broadway Paper. The wrapping station is one area where staff can get to know customers everyday.

"We offer gift-wrapping services year-round

and fourth quarter is insane," Strzok says. "People come right from the mall and have bags and bags full of things for us to wrap."

A lot of these people are men — not the store's core customer — who are buying for the women in their life. The staff asks questions and makes sure each box reflects the recipient.

Gift With Purpose

Gift is one area of the business Strzok has really started expanding, although not without hesitation.

"I really tried to hold onto the idea that I'm a paper store. I carry paper and stationery and then gift as an afterthought," Strzok says. "Looking at sales from this past fourth quarter, our gift category has just skyrocketed."

Broadway Paper has warmed to the idea of increasing gift options but with its main goals in mind. Most of its gift products are handmade in the U.S., with a large portion made locally, while items with the state of Wisconsin or anything Milwaukee on them have been flying out the door, according to Strzok.

Exploring more unique gift items is just one way Broadway Paper is thinking outside the box to compete with the discounts that appear to be the way of the future for big box stores. Rewarding customers with experiences and caring about customers has made this store anything but stationary ... it has found its niche as a rising small business. **LGR**

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