

Creative Thinking

Fewer shoppers and slower spending is making it hard for retailers to survive. What are some ways to drum up sales? << [By Anne-Marie Otey](#)

On her recent visits to New York showrooms, boutique owner Elyse Walker whipped out her BlackBerry

to snap pictures of outstanding shoes and handbags. Now she's e-mailing them to customers. "I say, 'I'm thinking of you. Take a look at this Valentino bag,'" said Walker, whose eponymous store is based in Pacific Palisades, Calif. "It's not a sales pitch."

She still calls customers, but she's being more selective and specific. "We just called our 100 top customers to tell them we had a bag of chocolate hearts for them, which they could pick up at the store."

In a bleak economy, retailers are coming up with creative ways to reach and sell to their customers. In Chicago, Bruce Wesley of Wesley's Shoe Corral and his staff are constantly brainstorming. Seeing how many men in their area trust their local barber, they decided to create a tie-in. They just made their first deal, giving a pair of shoes to one stylist, taking his picture and posting it prominently in the barbershop. Customers notice it, Wesley said, and that starts a conversation about Wesley's.

Collaborations with neighboring businesses or civic groups are effective when they have that affinity, said retail expert Doug Fleener. "You've got some strange duets, like Stevie Wonder and the Jonas Brothers at the Grammy Awards. So think about who complements what you sell."

Tom Julian, president of the Tom Julian Group brand con-

sultancy, once worked in a shoe store that sent models to a restaurant with high heels balanced on silver trays. "It's less expensive than a fashion show," he said.

Employees make pretty good shoe models, too. "Your sales people must wear the merchandise," said Fraser Ross, owner of Los Angeles-based Kitson. "People ask about it when they see it."

Entertaining and surprising the customer is also key. Lisa White, owner of three CK Collection shops in Fairhope, Ala., placed jewelry in the middle of her shoe

display one afternoon. "It adds glitz and adds to shoe sales," she said. In Calabasas, Calif., Dawn Spilman of Leap Shoe Lounge asked handbag designer Funky Junk to stitch up one-of-a-kind bags that match Minnetonka boots. "Customers love to see something they won't find anywhere else," she said.

And they like to see the unexpected. Walker has exclusively sold high-end brands, including Prada and Bottega Veneta, in her boutique. Now she is stocking watersnake bags by Beirn for \$325. "I'm looking for more items like that," she said. "If we do our job, the customers say, 'I'm spending less, but when I do shop, I'm shopping here.'"

Even the sales ritual is changing. "Good service still sells," Fleener said. "But so many salespeople are not as good as they think they are. When times were good, the customer created the sale more than the employees. The customer walks in now without the intent to purchase. So the staff needs to do more."

Rewrite the sales script, Fleener advised. "You say the usual, 'May I help you?' and they'll answer, 'Yeah, pay my mortgage.'" Fleener suggested a better offer: something free. For instance, if a customer tries on two pairs of shoes, give a \$10 gift card in return. "What creates purchase intent in a shoe store is getting the shoes on the feet," he noted.

Then comes the tricky moment when a customer says she likes the shoes, but simply can't afford them.

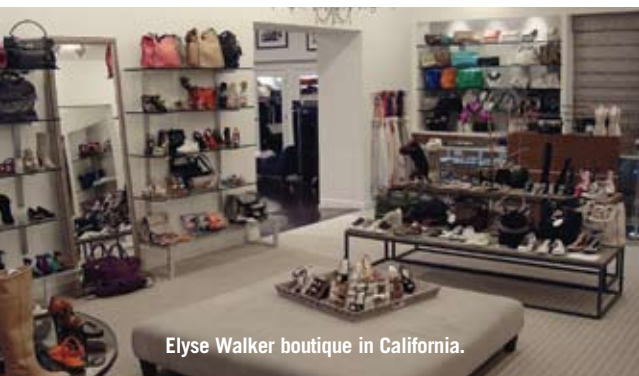
At that point, old-fashioned courtesy works best. "You don't want to embarrass the person," said Michael Kerstein, owner of Simons Shoes in Brookline, Mass. "Engage them in conversation. Perhaps there are lower-priced shoes. Mention layaway. Finally, give them a card with the information to let it percolate. We all know how to beat on someone to make a sale. But we want [customers] for the long run."



Tom Julian



Elyse Walker



Elyse Walker boutique in California.

Strategy Session

Footwear News asked retail experts to share their tips for capturing customers' attention — and dollars.

Dos:

Think multimedia. Consider everything from phone, mail, Internet, print advertising and editorial coverage to local cable TV. "You're a shoe expert — offer to write an article for a regional magazine," suggested Tom Julian, president of the Tom Julian Group brand consultancy.

Send e-mails. Include items such as discount coupons and pictures of new products.

Go to trade shows. "You need to see what's different, meet vendors and learn," said retail expert Doug Fleener.

Keep up appearances. Elyse Walker just renovated her namesake Pacific Palisades, Calif., boutique for the fourth time in seven years. "It can be even simpler, such as adding turquoise pillows for a spring update," she said.

Cooperate. Partner with local charities and businesses, exchanging mailing lists.

Don'ts:

Don't dial for dollars. The days of one-size-fits-all calls are over.

Don't be a spammer. Send e-mails once or twice a week at the most.

Don't be a wallflower. "Do you go to the local college to see what shoes the kids are wearing?" Julian asked. "It's part of your job, and it's not going to come to you."

Don't neglect your storefront. "Change your windows constantly," advised Fraser Ross, owner of Kitson in Los Angeles. "It creates entertainment."

Don't be afraid to take risks. Retailer Dawn Spilman, owner of Leap Shoe Lounge in Calabasas, Calif., consults an informal focus group of top customers when she wants to try something unusual.