



## Food For Thought: Week of May 26, 2014

### The War on Big Box Stores is Far From Over

Last weekend, I walked into a “Big Box” store that recently opened to look around. For those who will be distracted for the remainder of the article by wondering what store it was, I’ll tell you it was outside of our industry. Upon entering the store, I was greeted immediately. The showroom was spotless & well lit, the temperature was cool and the air was clean. I stepped up to a display case and was greeted again, asked if I wanted to look at anything specific, and invited to ask for help if I needed anything. Everything was tagged, priced, out of boxes and ready to be enjoyed. After looking around for a bit, being greeted yet again (in a comfortable way, not a harassing or annoying way), it was time to leave. As I was leaving, another employee wished a great day for me and asked that I come back again soon.

So why am I telling you this? Sounds like *Retail Store Ownership 101*, right? Well, on my way home from work every day, I pass an independently-owned competing business. On this day, I decided to stop in. The plaza had recently been updated (parking lot repaved, facade replaced, new window/door treatments, etc.) so all things were equal from the outside. As I walked in, I was nearly blown back by the aroma of someone’s lunch. A disclaimer, I love spicy food. However, this smelled like microwaved hair! The carpet was dirty, half of the working florescent lights were flickering, hardly anything was tagged or priced, it was uncomfortably warm (making the smell of lunch hang right in front of me the entire visit), and there was a banner advertising an event dated two weeks before. You get the picture.

But here is the most disappointing observation: As I walked in, all three employees made eye contact with me and returned to their lunch or conversation with the two other customers (more like hanging out buddies) in the store. On that point, as I was browsing, I overheard one conversation where the manager/owner was trash-talking the store I had just visited. He even had the nerve to say how “impersonal...sterile...soulless” it was in comparison to the stink hole I was standing in. I walked around for a solid five minutes and not one person greeted me, asked if I needed help, asked if I was looking for anything specific, **nothing**. As a conscious supporter of locally-owned businesses, this was a heartbreaking experience. I predict they will be out of business in less than a year.

The Bottom Line: The war is far from over in our industry. The first big scary monster, now gone, thinned the herd quite a bit. Then there was another. And now there’s another. They won’t be going away anytime soon. And as they return under a different name with different money, they do so a little smarter than the last one. To simply state you’re the underdog, the local business, the little guy fighting the good fight is not enough. People expect the **basics**: A clean & organized showroom, friendly staff who appreciate & enjoy having a job, competitive pricing and strong customer service.

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