

Appropriate for Chain Reaction or retail "noise"?

Behold the appearance of part of Chain Reaction Redwood City. What is that attached to the wall near our dressing rooms? Decoration? Something to add character? Does it belong in the modern retail environment? Is it appropriate or just something we think is cool? (Click on the photo to read the T-shirt's text.)



SCREW THE DOPERS. Does this belong on the wall at Chain Reaction?



This is how the t-shirt has been "displayed"

OK, what is it? It's a t-shirt I got from Versus network a few years back, when the prior year's Tour de France had been rocked by scandal (has there been one that wasn't?) and people were making noises that bike racing wasn't worth watching because the winners are all dopers and that somehow makes it not a legitimate sport (just like baseball, football, and, good gosh, golf even!). I put a link on our website to their Tour de France page, and in return, I got a T-shirt (hey, all Charlie Brown got was a rock, I'm not complaining).

So what does it mean when someone sees that t-shirt hanging on a wall outside the dressing rooms? Do they actually read what it says and think about it, or does it just look like an old orange t-shirt badly in need of dusting off? Does it somehow add desirable "character" to the shop, or does it add to the background noise level, a distraction from what is supposed to look like a professionally-run retail business?

It's tough, this idea of bringing up our retail presentation and standards to modern expectations. Whose expectations? I mean, isn't part of being in business for yourself an act of independence from "The Man", an almost-defiant act of putting your own stamp on things, so that you're mistaken for neither the hapless *Mart nor the sterile Nordstrom experience? Bikes aren't lingerie, or car batteries. They're something everyone on our staff really enjoys riding. To us, they're a lifestyle, and that's what this character or attitude stuff is all about. We want to promote that we're cool. We see stuff that separates us from the rest of the retail experience. We're hip.

Which is all well and good for those coming in who have already bought into the lifestyle and are looking for that casually-hip & trendy experience. But if Chain Reaction Bicycles were to have to pay the bills on just that crowd, we'd be broke. If we were to play the music that most of our younger staff would get into, rather than "Classic Vinyl" (Channel 46 on Sirius Radio), we'd alienate a lot of our core base of customers. In short, if we don't, at times, accept a lowest-common-denominator (but modern and well-implemented) approach to retail, we could become just another asterisk of the Internet, a place that people remember, a few people very fondly, some people not. We cannot afford to be a place that people would avoid coming back to because we've got too much attitude, too much badness factor. We need to deliver an exceptional and welcoming experience to all manner of people who make the effort to come and see us. Don't get put off by my "lowest common denominator" remark... I mean that in the best-possible way; that we need to seek a common ground with all who come in. It's not "lowering" anything really... rather, it's raising our ability to deliver the message that bikes are the most-wonderful thing on the planet to as many as possible.

This business, Chain Reaction Bicycles, has to be more than the combination of my employee's and my own view of what's personally cool about bikes. We have to excel at retail, delivering an experience that's friendly and efficient each and every time. We have to look at all the "cool" stuff on the walls and question whether that means anything to the average customer or if it's just noise, and one thing the world absolutely has too much of is noise. We have to recognize that what's really cool is getting as many people as possible to enjoy cycling as much as possible. That's great for cycling and great for business.

But my wife thinks I'm crazy to listen to retail experts who come in and tell me that that shirt needs to come down from the wall. The interesting thing here is that she's all too aware of my propensity for clutter & noise at home, and would love to see me adopt a "cleaner" (figuratively & literally) attitude around the house. The problem at the business, I think, is that what it is today represents a little bit of this, a little bit of that, that we've all contributed to over the years. It's "us" if you will, and to some extent (I think) we can't see the forest for the trees. What do you think? --Mike--