

A Long Hike

Specialty retailer uses digital to get hardcore customers through its doors

by JOHN MORELL

For many retailers, solving a Rubik's Cube is easier than seamlessly melding online sales with bricks-and-mortar operations.

It's a challenge that dogged Mark McKnight for much of his career as director of e-commerce and marketing for Rock/Creek, a six-store, Chattanooga, Tenn.-based outdoor outfitter.

"I've been involved in online sales since nearly the beginning, and like others I saw the inherent disconnect that was becoming greater each year," says McKnight. "You have the customer who browses online then purchases in the bricks-and-mortar store. They know the products they want, having spent time doing research, but they get to the store and the associates have to start fresh with that person, not knowing their interests or knowledge."

Rock/Creek doesn't necessarily appeal to casual hikers, instead featuring equipment designed for back country backpackers who obsess about gear. Its "core customers" rely on some of the things we sell to keep them alive when they're out in the wilderness, so naturally they're going to be doing a great deal of research," says McKnight, who left Rock/Creek last month to become chief marketing officer for outdoor recreation website RootsRated says. "They can really geek out on all of the information."

Rock/Creek's marketing targets these loyal customers heavily. "This small percentage of consumers makes up a very big chunk of our business, so it's critical to find them and cater to their needs," he says.



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EMBRACING MOBILE

When he assessed the company's progress in the fall of 2014, McKnight found some growth but also saw that the company's outdated point-of-sale system and website needed changing.

"I've met with lots of businesses like Rock/Creek who have the same question, 'How does my physical store fit into a digital strategy?'" says David Trice, CEO of Engage.cx, a firm that helps create retail customer relationship management programs.

"Showrooming used to be a talking point, but now we know it's part of the landscape and can't be prevented. We've got to figure out how to make it work for the retailer."

Trice's philosophy is that a retailer with bricks-and-mortar locations holds a distinct advantage over online-only businesses since consumers still prefer an in-store experience.

"A recent study by Deloitte showed that out of \$2.9 trillion in retail busi-



ness in 2014, only 14 percent of that figure was e-commerce. This tells us that in-store purchases aren't going away. However, we know that the customer's motivations are often different. They're not coming in to see what's available. They already know what's there by checking it out online, and want to finalize the purchase at the location."

The "new normal" for retailers, Trice believes, will be embracing mobile to maintain business growth. "The best way to view it is that the iPhone in your customer's hand is another POS. They can see a product in the store but don't see their size, and buy it on their device before they leave."

Rock/Creek "needed a more respon-

sive mobile site because that's where everything is right now," McKnight says. "The rise in mobile traffic has been phenomenal the last few years. Our consumers have made trips to the store more like surgical strikes than just coming in to browse. They've done all their research and continue to check what's available ... when they're walking to the register."

Rock/Creek has added free in-store Wi-Fi, offering it to customers who opt in with their Facebook information. The goal, when an advanced POS system is in place, is to collect sales data and look back to the pages customers checked while on the store's Wi-Fi.

"That kind of information will be very useful," says McKnight. "We do lots of product events and we'll be able to go to vendors and show them hard data on what products people are buying during their events."

CROSS-CHANNEL KNOWLEDGE

Becoming knowledgeable about individual core customers has been the goal, but making it work across channels has been difficult.

"When a customer is on the site regularly buying merchandise, Rock/Creek 'can learn some key points about them,'" McKnight says. "But when he or she walks into the store, we have no idea who they are. If someone left an abandoned item in their online shopping cart, the ideal would be to have an associate say, 'I see you didn't buy that jacket last night, can I complete the purchase for you?' But there are some issues with that."

Privacy concerns could make some customers uncomfortable. "I believe it comes down to a generational issue," Trice says. "An older consumer like myself might be a little put off if an associate in a store starts talking about

the items I've been looking at before I bring it up. People in my daughter's generation who've grown up with the web will likely be more accepting. They'll see it as helpful."

Finding the "recent adopter" enthusiast or an established hiker who moved into the shopping area of a Rock/Creek store is another goal, although it's been somewhat elusive.

"The targeting I've seen from some marketing firms is pretty plain," says McKnight. "They get your publically available data from new home sales or address changes, but that's so 20 years ago. The 'spray and pray' days of approaching marketing are coming to an end. We want to find those perfect customers and aim specifically for them." **STORES**

John Morell is a Los Angeles-based writer who has covered retail and business topics for a number of publications around the world.