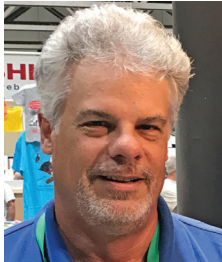


HMAVIEWPOINT

The pandemic has reshaped model railroad retail, both on the ground and in cyberspace.



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Lockdowns and closures changed consumer buying overnight. No longer could a modeler hop in the car and head to the hobby shop for a bottle of paint, at least at the onset of a virus that has redefined normal. Suddenly, finding paint, structures, model trains and other hobby supplies became online only.

For brick-and-mortar retailers with little online presence, their worlds temporarily stopped spinning, jeopardizing their livelihoods. Those who had a web-shopping platform kept cash registers active with the industry's surge in online purchasing.

While modelers holed up in basements and hobby rooms, manufacturers experienced upticks in sales. Retailers who offered some or all inventory online got the lion's share.

Since then, reopenings are instilling hope throughout much of the model railroad industry. Social distancing continues to keep hobbyists at bay, limiting trips to shops and social activity to Zoom, Messenger and other online meetings. But sales are resuming in earnest for retailers across the country.

Still, it's not business as usual. The playing field has changed. Gone may be the days that a shop owner could bank on a flurry of traffic every Saturday afternoon.

Technology is charting a new direction. Those who join the wagon train are more likely to stay in motion.

"If you want to stay in business, you need to be online," says National Retail Hobby Stores Association President Charlie Hirschberg. "The whole key to this COVID-19 is you really have to have an active website with a shopping cart, one that fully functions," he told me in a recent conversation.

Hirschberg knows that firsthand. He and his son, Chris, operate Nassau Hobby Center in Freeport, N.Y., and during the pandemic sales have soared 135 percent, largely because customers are buying off the website. Charlie has heard similar stories from other retailers.

In Oklahoma City, Whistlestop Trains adapted like many shops and offered curbside service when a lockdown forced closure. Then owner Ed Birch, Jr., quickly revamped the venerable shop's website for e-commerce. Although a work in progress, the site paid immediate dividends. By mid-June it had generated 5,000 hits and an uptick in sales.

"People are finding us," he said. "In the first two weeks we had 2,000 hits. Orders have been sporadic because we don't have everything there. But it's working. There are a lot more people buying online than there used to be."

Whistlestop Trains continues to invest in and tweak the site, and Birch realizes it will take time for it to fully complement indoor shopping. That's just part of the process for something that is necessary to sustain the future.

Websites have become the face of competitive model railroad retailing. If correctly positioned, a store's website can create new business and serve existing customers who want to— or must — shop from home.

Content is king in the web world. The information on a website drives good search engine optimization (SEO), which takes consumers where they want to go when looking for products. If a consumer seeks a particular HO-scale New York Central boxcar that your store handles, your website must rank high in SEO through engaging content, or it won't be found.

Once the consumer drops in, she needs to see appealing descriptions and photos that lead to a shopping cart and eventually a transaction. A one-page howdy doody will not suffice.

Building an effective e-commerce website requires time and know-how, and typically should be left to a qualified web designer. Once established, websites must be updated as inventory and services change.

Hirschberg believes consumers will return to stores because they love their hobbies. Nothing beats browsing shelves and wandering aisles looking for must-have items.

But a big lesson COVID-19 has taught the industry is to be prepared when the doors can't open.

That's where internet presence is essential. And getting started is the first step.

"If you want to stay in business, you have to start on that," Hirschberg said. "You need to be online." **HM**



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