

# HMA VIEWPOINT

## Curb appeal applies to hobby stores, too



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**H**aving hung around the rental housing industry for eight years, I've seen apartment marketing transform from ads in local rental magazines to full videos that rival Hollywood productions.

In last month's HMA Viewpoint, Jon Tamkin of Mission Models asked if we're in tune with our customers. He reminded me that they are well educated about their hobbies and have many options for purchasing items, at least one as close as a touch on a smartphone.

Tamkin's message is that business owners have to take charge. Just being in business isn't an invitation for sales. Half the battle for any retail business is attracting people, whether at a brick and mortar location or on the web. The rest of the battle is engaging them once they're there.

Through videography and 3D animation, apartment marketers appeal to prospective renters through a virtual experience. Some people lease without ever seeing the actual apartment. User generated content is big, too. One campaign at a Dallas property shared residents taking selfies of their favorite amenities. It generated 2,400 social media posts and 3,700 unique website sessions.

To attract buyers and renters to a new home, sellers must highlight either its location or its curb appeal. The hobby industry's look from the street could use a little sprucing up. But, not as much as you might think. Apartment marketers are actually doing a high-tech spin on the old hobby shop practice of inviting the customer inside.

Think back to that first euphoric feeling of walking into the train store or hobby shop. Model aircraft hanging from the ceiling, seemingly flying somewhere. A train whizzes around a loop of track, and the smell of paint and plastic becomes sensory overload.

That immersion stimulated our desires to dive headfirst into model trains, planes and automobiles. We scrambled for spare change to walk out with something.

While at a hobby shop recently, I observed a newcomer stand in front of the store train layout and ask why it was idle. "You need to have this running," the man said enthusiastically. "This is too beautiful a layout just to sit there." Unfortunately, the shop owner didn't take the cue, and the customer left without making a purchase.

Lamented one manufacturer: hobby shop marketing isn't just unlocking the front door. A straw poll of some manufacturers reveals that it doesn't take much to create excitement for customers inside a store or on a website. In this case, it's not about the sales method an organization uses to deliver a product or service. Motion sells. A model train layout looks better when an engine pulls a few cars.

Another idea is the standard retail practice of positioning products with related items. At the grocery store, corn chips go next to cheese dip to encourage shoppers to buy both. A model railroad store display should show models of delivery vans next to a warehouse kit, inspiring the modeler to a more in-depth view of the products' potential.

How about having how-to clinics one or two Saturdays a month on building that warehouse kit and other models? Or, ask manufacturers to drop by for a meet-and-greet with customers. Sound familiar? It should. These marketing tips have been around for years but seem to have gotten lost, at least for some retailers.

Bobbye Hall, a pioneer of model railroading retail and manufacturing who owned Hallmark Models and Hall's Hobby House in Dallas, was an excellent marketer. In the early days of the shop, she reserved Thursday nights for coffee and cake socials to entice customers to stop in. Also, in her autobiography "Tracks from Texas to Tokyo" (Ballpark Impressions, 2006) she captured the spirit of the season by running special promotions on holidays and other occasions. Yep, even Valentine's Day. Items marked with a red dot were discounted.

And she built a mailing list by asking customers to guess the number of jelly beans in a brandy snifter in exchange for mailing addresses. The first person who guessed right got a \$100 gift certificate.

Marketing hobby products – or any others – may seem more complicated today, but it still boils down to creating excitement through in-store promotion.

P.T. Barnum said, "Without promotion, something terrible happens ... nothing!" and "Nothing draws a crowd quite like a crowd." These venerable words of wisdom still apply today. **HM**



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