

Friendly focus

How Christian retailers can succeed, by those who care about them

An industry survey by *Christian Retailing*

» BY JIM SEYBERT

HAVING A WELL-TRAINED STAFF WHO CARE about people is more important for the success of Christian retail stores than being open Sundays, according to a panel comprising those who make up “friends and family” of the Christian products industry.

In the first report for our new Vital Signs series—focusing on the health of Christian retailing and the Christian products industry—we surveyed people who are interested in and concerned about Christian retail, but neither work in the channel nor for companies who provide products for retailers.

Our panel of clergy, authors, musicians, media, agents and just plain consumers shared a unique perspective on the retail channel they care about. Here is what we found:

PREFERENCES

Nearly 80% had purchased a Christian product within the previous 30 days, and among the most recent buyers, three in five had made their purchases in a brick-and-mortar Christian store.

Moreover, 84% had shopped in a physical Christian retail store within the last year, and 21% said they had shopped in Christian stores more frequently in 2007 than they did in 2006. On the other hand, 41% told us that they frequented Christian retail less in 2007. Thirty-eight

percent reported that their shopping patterns did not change.

The most common reason given for shopping less often in Christian stores was a switch to more convenient online buying, followed by comments about pricing and selection at Christian stores.

While they may not be shopping in Christian stores as often as they had been, 40% said they bought more Christian products in 2007 than they did in the previous year.

PRIORITIES

Among the many things Christian retailers can do to attract and keep customers, having a staff that “really cares about people” should be the highest priority, according to our panel. They rated the importance of a caring staff at 5.31 on a six-point scale.

Staff training was a close second at 5.15 out of six, followed by “having the largest selection” (4.76) and “having low prices” (4.74).

Having a good “selection of general interest titles” was seen as not at all important by 40%, while 70% saw no value in stores being open for business Sunday. In fact, the importance of Sunday opening received an overall vote of 1.95 on the six-point scale, less than half the score was given to “better lighting and store design” (4.14).

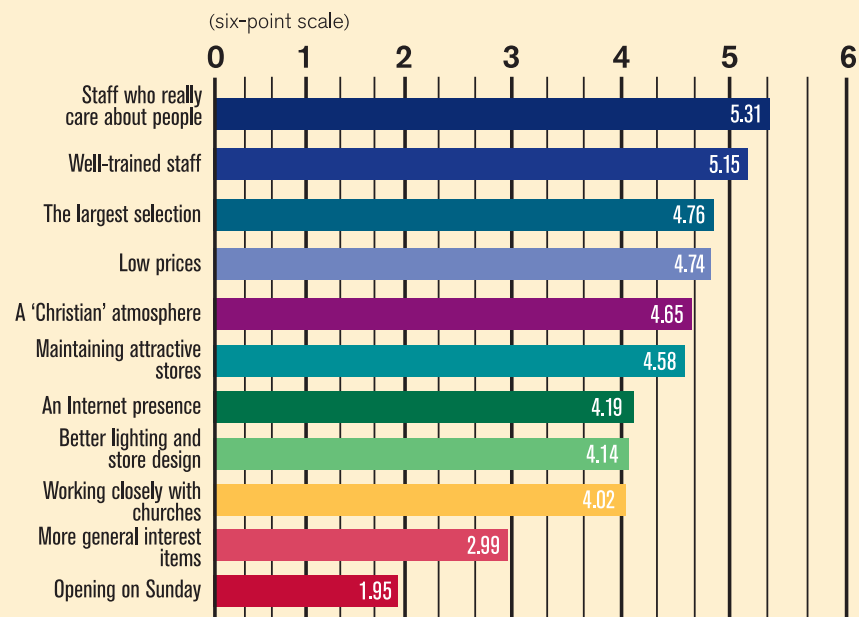
Christian retail shopping

Respondents last shopped in a brick-and-mortar Christian store:



Graph information courtesy The Jim Seybert Co.

Christian stores should concentrate on:



Graph information courtesy The Jim Seybert Co.

The Vital Signs survey was distributed to recipients of Christian Retailing's Christian Retailing news service in September. Of 210 respondents, 109 were identified as “friends and family” of Christian retail, neither working in retail nor selling products to retailers. Vital Signs is a joint project of Christian Retailing and Jim Seybert, who are solely responsible for its content. Seybert is an author and consultant living in Arroyo Grande, Calif.

Consumers pointed to “higher prices” and the convenience of Internet shopping as common reasons for the “failure” of Christian stores, and suggested that success will come as retailers embrace and reflect a broader scope of Christian experience, including more theological, cultural and demographic diversity in their product selection.

PREDICTIONS

Some predicted that Christian retail would grow in the next five years by becoming “leaner and stronger.” Others thought that growth would occur as “more exciting and interesting” products

STAYAWAY SHOPPERS TELL WHY

Among the reasons our Vital Signs survey respondents gave for shopping less at Christian retail stores:

“Less time for destination shopping.”

“Easier to order online and have product shipped to me.”

“Stores are stocking only materials that agree with their theology.”

“Nothing strong or quality for kids, except for VeggieTales.”

“Wide availability and low prices from online vendors.”

Read more verbatim responses to our latest Vital Signs industry survey online at www.christianretailing.com/vitalsigns.

are released.

Some respondents questioned the ability of “mom and pop” independent stores to remain viable, while forecasting that Christian chains and super-independents could grow stronger if they find the right mix of products, pricing and service.

PROGRESS

This Vital Signs series is intended to generate meaningful dialogue among key players in the Christian retail channel. The industry faces important questions, which can be answered only through frank and open discussion—no matter how politically incorrect or uncomfortable such conversations may be.

As you interact with colleagues, competitors, partners and committed consumers like those surveyed for this report, make it a point to ask tough questions and listen for their answers.

Jim Seybert is a consultant based in Arroyo Grande, Calif. He can be reached at jim@jimseybert.com.

CHRISTIAN RETAILING **WHAT DO YOU THINK?**
Write to Vital Signs at: Christian Retailing,
600 Rinehart Road, Lake Mary, FL 32746, or
e-mail andy.butcher@strang.com.