VITAL SIGNS

Customer connections

How stores care for shoppers—and handle their concerns

An industry survey by *Christian Retailing*

»» By Jim Seybert

Though cheaper prices elsewhere have commonly been held to be a major issue for Christian retail stores, it seems that cost is not that big a deal after all.

Only one in 14 retailers "agreed strongly" that when consumers stopped shopping at their store. it was usually because of pricing, we found in our latest Vital Signs industry survey, which looked at how retailers view and care for shoppers.

Our findings separated for-profit stores from those that operate as part of a church ministry.

PRICE AND PRAYER

Retailers told us that they most commonly feel "frustrated" (48%) or "challenged" (50%) when shoppers mention they can buy products for a lower price elsewhere. However, nearly two-thirds of church retailers said they were "happy" for the shopper who could take advantage of a lower price.

One in three non-church stores provided shoppers with a means of listing prayer requests in the store (30%), while only 9% of church-based stores did so. Getting the staff together to pray for customers occurred "frequently" in 43% of non-church and 25% of church stores.

STATEMENTS AND STAFF

Nearly all stores made a point of greeting customers by name (96%), and shoppers were more likely to receive a thank-you note after shopping in a for-profit store (35%) than at a church store (7%).

Having a mission statement that staff understands can help them stay focused on ideals that are important to the store, and a majority of stores reported having one (60%), while less than one-fourth displayed it in a place where customers could see it (22%).

Staffing numbers are about equal in church and for-profit stores. At their busiest times, there are three to five people working the floor in 43% of non-church and 48% of church stores.

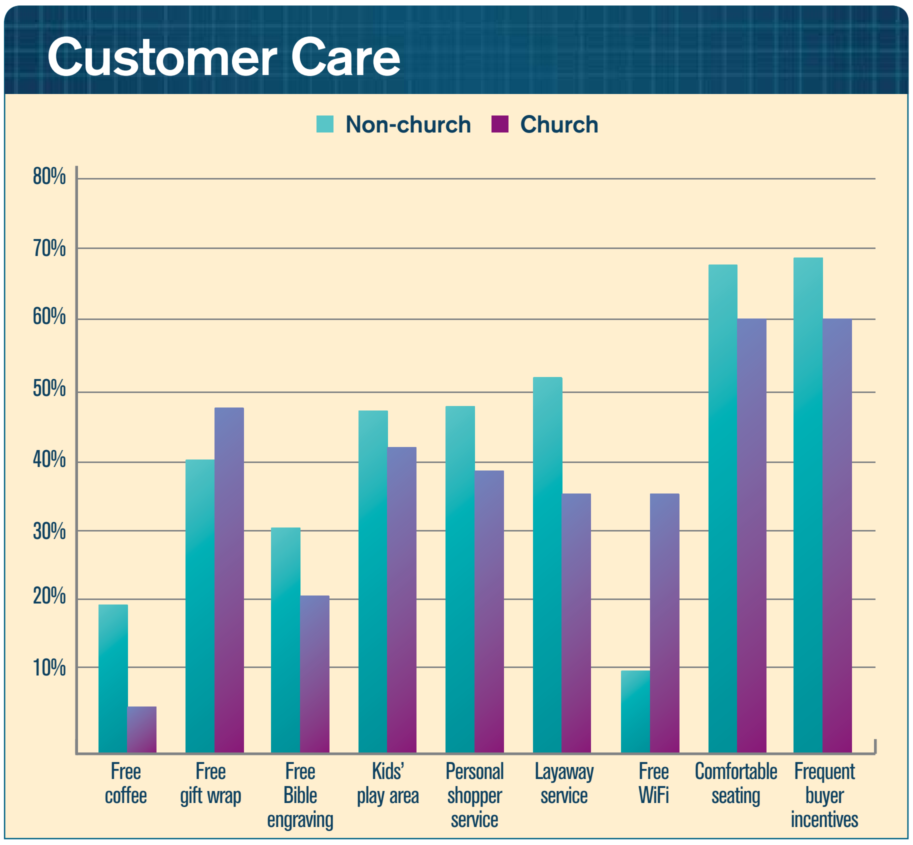
Commercially operated stores tended to provide more checkouts for shoppers, with 22% having four or more—compared to just 17% of church stores. The most common number of cash-wrap stations was just one, found in 34% of all stores.

RETURNS AND REWARDS

Customers will find staff in street clothes at 86% of all stores—with 68% setting guidelines for what to wear. Staff in church stores are more likely to wear a name tag or laminate (68% to 43%). About 10% of stores provided aprons or vests to help customers identify clerks.

It appears to be easier to return product in church stores. Only 37% of church stores told us that they require a receipt to process a return, compared to 51% of for-profits. There was a "no questions asked" return policy at 49% of church stores—while 31% of for-profits had a similar policy.

Additionally, half of non-church stores told us that they set a specific limit on how long after a sale they will accept returns, something practiced in 37% of church stores.



Graph information courtesy The Jim Seybert Co.

Frequent buyer rewards are the most common amenity offered by stores. More than 60% said they have a frequency plan in place, and a similar number offered comfortable seating areas for shoppers.

Customers in 39% of church stores are provided free WiFi. Far fewer nonprofits do the same (10%). Layaway services are seen more in for-profit stores (52% to 37%).

EXAMPLES AND IDEAS

What do retailers say to shoppers who mention lower prices elsewhere?

Some stores explain how because of their size they do not get the same discounts that other, larger retailers do, while others talk about the superior customer service they are able to offer. One retailer told us: "I encourage them to shop wherever they can get the best deal."

Respondents also listed some of the things they had done in recent months to make their stores more customer-friendly.

The initiatives included opening more hours, utilizing social media and learning customers' names.

Read more responses and comments in a special online supplement at http://vitalsigns.christianretailing.com.

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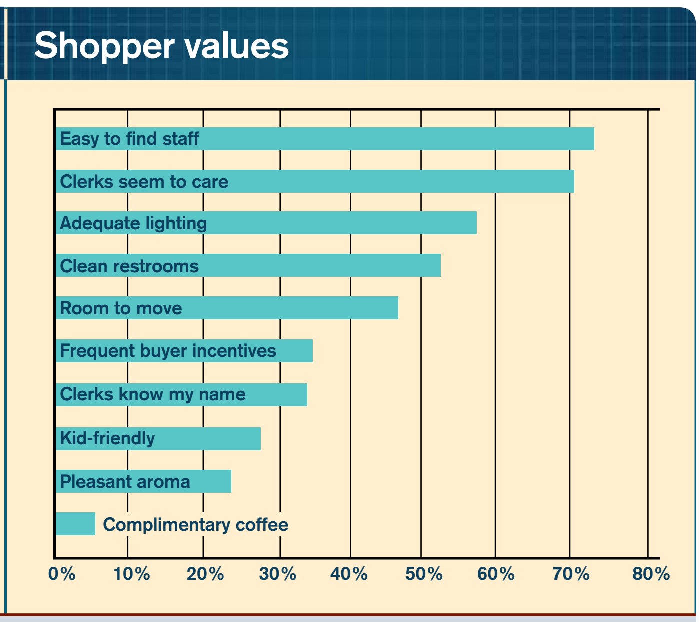

This Vital Signs survey was conducted online in April 2010 among readers of Christian Retailing's Christian Retailing Update *news service. Of 254 total replies, 168 were retailers. Vital Signs is a joint project of* Christian Retailing *and Jim Seybert, who are solely responsible for its content.*

CHRISTIAN RETAILING

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

...of the findings and comments?

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