

By Bill Guertin

The 800-Pound Gorilla

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Why Everything Old Is Cool Again... and How You Can Be Groovy Too

Have you noticed, daddio? Retro is back, and it's gaining momentum.

The American marketplace has always had a soft spot for nostalgia, but this is different. The neo-Retro movement is a hip, sophisticated, sometimes tongue-in-cheek adaptation of the pop culture and design of the past several decades.

Part of the reason for this trend is that those in their 20's and 30's are rebelling against the slick, polished marketing in today's society, a response to the throwaway culture we've become. For the baby boom generation, it's a way to relive some of their fondest memories.

For others, it's just plain cool.

Millions of people are hooked on digital flea markets like eBay and Craigslist.org that allow people to find retro merchandise from all over the world. The most popular show on public television, "The Antiques Roadshow," is a live on-camera treasure hunt for the most valuable items from days gone by.

Exclusive resale clothing and housewares stores have become the smart way to buy upscale for a downscale price. Unique, retro-styled bars, restaurants and stores are redefining "enjoyable atmosphere" in direct contrast to the cookie-cutter predictability and sameness of major franchises.

The Ford Mustang, Dodge Charger, Chrysler 300C and Chevrolet HHR are among the hottest-selling vehicles, newly redesigned cars with nostalgic lines. In clothing, Hush-Puppies, Lacoste, Converse and Puma are all retro labels that are back on store shelves and in demand.

Need more evidence? Drive-in movies, photo booths, roller derby, Nick At Nite, ESPN Classic, and the fashionable Martini with the long-stemmed glass are all in vogue.

As a business owner, how can you make this trend work for you? Take a piece of paper or a notebook and begin to brainstorm using these idea-starters:

- What was it like to do business with companies in your industry 20, 40, 50, or even 75 years ago? What did people experience, and how is it different today? For example, frozen foods were not nearly as prevalent in supermarket aisles as they are today, because time-starved families of today are in need of quick-to-prepare dinners. In contrast, the convenience of milk delivery to homes, which was very common 50 years ago, has all but disappeared. How

different is your business today than what people experienced a generation ago, and what would be worth revisiting today?

- What did advertisements from the past emphasize about the experience? What did marketers feel was important to the consumers of the day? When guitar amplifier manufacturers replaced vacuum tube amps with solid-state circuitry, they improved durability and made them cheaper to manufacture. Many guitarists, however, missed the rich, full-bodied sound of their old equipment. What about your products? As newer products and services were introduced, did people miss out on some of the benefits of the previous offerings?
- Years ago, what was the merchandise mix or the range of services provided to consumers in your business or industry? Was the list larger or smaller than it is today? For example, banks offered little more than savings accounts, checking accounts and loans; today most banks offer a dozen or more distinct financial services. The opposite can be said about gas stations; an attendant used to pump your gas, wipe down your windshield, and check your oil. Today's gas stations are mainly do-it-yourself operations. Could there be advantages to specializing or widening your range of offerings to the way it was "in the good old days"?
- What could you do or add in a nostalgic way that would be fun, memorable and/or valuable to your current clients? Décor, music, aromas, and good old-fashioned service are just a few places to start.
- What could you do or add in a nostalgic way that would be attractive to an entirely new group of customers? If you don't cater much to seniors, for example, what could you do to make the older generation feel more like invited guests?
- How could you partner with a non-competing business to add "nostalgic value" to what you do? Many years ago, theatergoers would stop at Johnson's Homemade Candies on Schuyler Avenue next door to the Paramount Theatre for a box of fresh caramel corn before seeing a show. A place like Sweet Street might look into capitalizing on a combination like that with one of the local movie theatres or video stores.

By tying in your roots (or the roots of your industry) with today's consumers, you're engaging them in a unique way, and making their experience with you potentially more memorable and enjoyable.

One word of caution, however: be sure the customer understands the value of the old-time touch you're adding, and can attribute it uniquely to you. If there's no perceived value to the customer, and the benefit isn't attributable to you, it may not be worth doing at all.

And that would be, like, so un-righteous, man.

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