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RAILROAD REPORT



BEING A RESOURCE TO YOUR CUSTOMERS

As a retailer, planning ahead is the key to success in your store as is in almost everything you do.

For the purposes of this column, the planning I'm referencing is the after-holiday purchases. In my opinion, along with that of many others, the main reason a brick and mortar hobby shop is successful is the one-on-one personal relationship it fosters with its customers. This includes everyone from the repeat customer that seems to have his own chair in the store, to the person who's stepped inside for the first time. As with all interactions, it's the first impression we make that will lead to a boom or a bust before we even have a chance to nurture the person.

The reason I mention this is that after the holidays your shop will be flooded with people who just received their first taste of the hobby of model railroading. Obviously in this case we are talking trains, but it really relates to any of the hobby disciplines. The person who is entering your store could range the gamut from a child's first set that was set up around the tree to an adult who after many years of being out of the hobby has for any variety of reasons decided he'd like to get back into model railroading. Additionally there are lots of people who will visit a train show and get inspired. As mentioned your first face-to-face encounter will set the stage for their future with you and your store. The last thing you want to do is give them a negative comment on their wishes or on the product they brought to your store

looking for help. As a brick and mortar dealer you need to make them want to visit you.

So now that I have rambled on, how can we be a resource to our train customers? One way is to help them with selection of the scale of their future railroad layout and type of locomotives and rolling stock they have to choose from. It may be an odd comparison, but it's just like when we overfill our plates at the local all-you-can-eat buffet. There's so much to choose from we don't know when to say no. It's the same with the new train enthusiast who's walked into your store, seen the vast array of train selections and instantly will have grandiose thoughts of recreating the entire east coast Amtrack line in his basement only because he's taken a recent vacation.

This is where we come in as a responsible dealer and a resource. Even though our job is to sell, for a long-term relationship it's our responsibility to temper the desire and to scale the layout to the available space and thickness of the customers's pocket book.



The post-holiday customer may want to build on his first "around the tree" exposure to model railroading, but space is always a consideration as a single O-scale building (rear) takes up roughly the same amount of room as two HO buildings (middle) or four N-scale structures (front).

Our first task is to encourage them on their quest and the second is to ask some basic questions: How much space do you want to dedicate to your layout? What type of trains do you prefer: passenger, freight, late 1900s steam or modern day? Are you looking for long haul, a rail yard, city or rural scenes or perhaps a combination of a couple of ideas? Do you prefer landscapes or structures? Do you like to build, or at least would you like to learn how to build? Are you looking to construct an outdoor garden railroad?

It's a lot to throw out to the newbie all at one time, but the

answers to these basic questions will guide you in helping to provide him with a sense of focus so he doesn't attack his new hobby like the aforementioned buff. By getting him pointed in the right direction early on he will quickly learn what will work in his allotted space. It may sound silly, but an important thing I learned long ago is that the curve radius of the four major scales is still the curve's radius. A 36-inch radius is still 36 inches regardless if it's N-scale or G-scale. As dealers of the products, we know that long haul freight or passenger lines will require larger radius tracks to run, but this will be valuable information to the new railroader and if space is an issue, he may have to temper his desire. Whatever you do, don't say something like, "That won't work," and walk away. Explain why and assist the person in modifying his plans. A perfect example is if a short radius is used with long haul freight and definitely with passenger trains in many cases the rolling stock will derail and even when the trains do run okay they will not look correct on turns with half of the locomotive and cars hanging off the track banging into the landscaping and structures located on the curves.

In many cases, especially this time of the year, the customer's first train will be a Christmas themed O-gauge starter set. If you've found the customer likes the idea of building structures and creating a city, or even a small town, but his space is limited, he might be better off leaving the O-gauge for around the tree and choosing a different set in HO or N-scale. As an example, within say 20 inches of allotted space one could easily fit five or more structures in N-scale where in O-gauge he would be lucky to squeeze in two at the most. If it's an outdoor railroad your customer is interested in creating, then garden, or G-scale is the direction you want to point him.

If there is a fancy rail yard in mind and he wants to control the movement of freight and passenger cars, the need for structures shrinks but the need to run multiple radius turnouts increases. The biggest factor with any layout is the size and space available when choosing the scale. You'll need to work with



Consideration also needs to be given to the type of locomotives and rolling stock the budding enthusiast is interested in. As an example even though the Union Pacific EMD DDA40X and the GG1 are shown in HO (half-O for those not in the know) locomotives for this size will still require a minimum of a 36-inch radius turn to operate correctly, whereas an N-scale switcher style of engine will easily operate on a layout as compact as two feet in total width.

best suited. In every instance match the layout to the customer.

In every case there is no doubt we are talking about digital control. Quality controllers are available from all of the manufacturers and distributors, so how does one choose? In just about every case it's all about cost and expansion capability. This goes back to the original

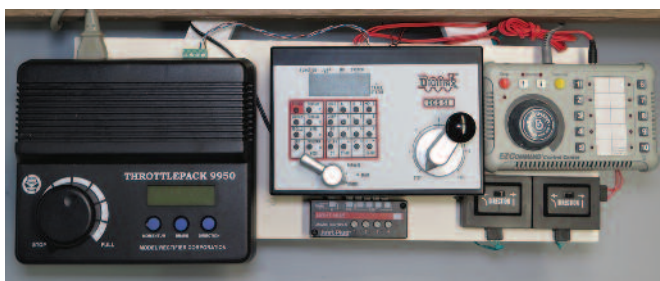


In many instances the first real exposure to an operating model railroad layout will be at a train show, or more likely in a hobby store, so it's important that the layout be properly maintained with as many up to date products as practical.

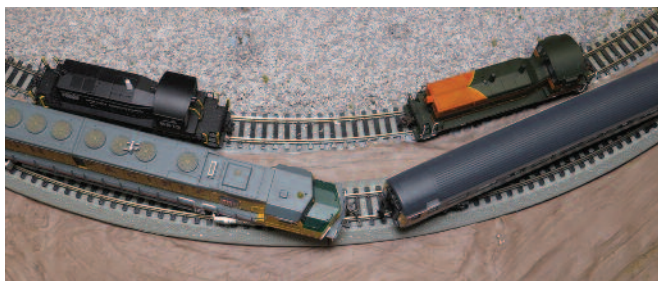
discussions on where he is headed in this journey. The last thing a customer wants to hear is that they need to buy a better system because they outgrew the original purchase in a short time. In some cases when they are "testing the waters" so to speak buying the better system later may be a legitimate option, but always recommend a system that is easy to use and will carry him for at least a reasonable amount of time.

It is true that as store owners we must not only have our own website, but we are constantly competing with international discount sellers for business. That said, to stay in business as a brick and mortar store we need the respect of our customers, and to this end we must treat each and every one the exact same way we would want to be treated if it was our first time in the store.

Showing interest in the project and helping lead the person down the correct path whenever we can will go a long way in developing a long-term relationship. And it may sound redundant, but the best place to start is in the beginning when he first walks into your store. **HM**



The potential rail customer can quickly become overwhelmed by all of the new terms being tossed out such as digital control and plug and play, and your job is to explain what these mean in such a manner as to put his mind at ease.



A picture is worth a thousand words, and when you're having trouble explaining to the individual why the switcher will cruise the layout but the EMD won't work in his space limitations, rail up a loco or rolling stock and show him that there's simply no way for the train to operate properly.