

Details make



Are you getting the most from your pen retailer? Here's what you can expect from the best.

One of my favorite pen shop owners once told me about the day a salesman came into his store, trying to get him to carry a new line of mechanical pencils.

"I didn't like them," Peter said. "They weren't good enough for my customers." The salesman was adamant, and continued to push. Finally, he criticized the pencils Peter carried, saying they didn't have erasers on them.

"My customers," Peter roared, "*don't make mistakes!*"

It's a cute story, but there's an essential message behind it: this owner's first concern was for the people who came into his store. Beyond price, beyond product, the store that earns your business should be the one that puts your needs above all.

What makes a great pen retailer?

My favorite retailers...

encourage me to experiment

A retailer should make me feel welcome to try different pens so I can find what works best for me.

keep it clean

Dipping a fountain pen can be messy, so I like it when a shop keeps tissues handy and immediately offers one, or better yet, keeps wet hand-wipes so I can clean my fingers.

I'm also impressed when the retailer cleans the pen promptly when I've finished trying it. It might only be a quick wipe with a tissue, but it tells me the store cares about the product and the next customer. Even if I know it'll be cleaned thoroughly after I leave, that little bit of up-front attention says a lot.

know their nibs

As we all know so well, one manufacturer's medium nib is another's extra-broad. I really appreciate it when a salesperson offers the nib that writes to my preference, even if it isn't necessarily the size indicated on the box. I can always try the next size up or down, but that initial offering tells me that I'm truly dealing with a professional.

know what I like

It can be overwhelming to walk into a well-stocked pen store, with so many models on display. By asking the right questions, a salesperson can narrow it down to the pens that will best fit my style. That could include such things as whether I prefer posting a pen, if I need a pocket clip, if I like light or heavy pens, how I prefer to fill it and whether features such as retractable nibs interest me. What I'm planning to do with the pen can also be an important consideration: is it more for show, or do I need a work-horse? If I don't use the pen every day, will one model stay wet longer than another? If the retailer is out of stock in a particular color or nib size, or doesn't have a new design I am looking for, I appreciate his trying to order it from the manufacturer.

never underestimate me

I may only be buying a \$20 plastic pen right now, but my next visit might be for a \$1,000 gold one. I appreciate retailers/salespeople who don't make assumptions about

the Difference

BY JIL MCINTOSH

what I am willing to buy or what I can afford. I realize there are “tire-kickers” in every industry, but a good retailer chats a bit about the product, asks the right questions, and uses that information to determine my collector level.

recommend related products

I expect the retailer and the sales staff to have a thorough understanding of all the products in the store and how everything fits together. I’m impressed when a retailer suggests a brand of ink that will work well with a specific model, or reminds me to buy extra cartridges. I give especially high marks to those who know the type of paper that complements the nib and the ink, and can steer me toward appropriate stationery.

keep me in their files

I once had my eye on a pen that was priced a bit higher than my wallet would allow. The salesperson remembered and called me when it went on sale.

don’t pressure me

If I don’t like a pen, I don’t want the salesperson to keep pushing it on me. I know he or she wants to sell it, but I don’t want to buy it.

walk me through the pen

This is vitally important if the customer is new to fountain pens, but even seasoned veterans can appreciate this, especially if it’s an unfamiliar brand. The salesperson should be able to show me how to fill it, store it and clean it—both the nib and the barrel.

protect me

The retailer should explain the warranty, tell me what documentation I need to keep and describe the process for obtaining repairs if necessary. If I can return it to the store, all the better, but if I have to send it directly to the manufacturer, having the information beforehand makes it all go more smoothly should the worst happen.

Of course, every pen user will have different ideas about what he or she likes about the retail experience, but for many people, it’s the attention to detail that makes the difference between a good shop and a great one. Shopping for a pen should be just as rewarding as sitting down and writing with it.

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Good retailers are good listeners, as evidenced by Ed Hamilton of Century Pens in Chicago (facing page) and Bert Oser of Bertram’s Inkwell in Kensington, Md. (right).

