

editor's note



Recently, my wife told me she wanted our kayaks out of the garage at our cottage and instead wants them stored in the backyard under the deck.

It seemed like a simple enough request. I bought an inexpensive kayak rack, assembled it and prepared to load the kayaks. The question, though, was how to secure the kayaks so random folks wouldn't simply "borrow" them. Fortunately, we weren't the first people with this issue, and we discovered that there are some very clever devices called lasso cables to secure kayaks. Essentially, you fit a lasso over each end, tighten it, thread the cable through a secure object and connect the ends. The lengths are adjustable to take up the slack.



The trick, it turns out, is actually buying the cables. If you go online, you can find them at several big box stores. But when you call a specific store, they either don't have them in stock or they don't carry them at that location (and that's if you can find a salesperson who even knows what they are).

What surprised me most, though, wasn't that no one had them available. What amazed me was that rather than trying to locate the item, almost every salesperson instead advised me to try calling one of their other stores. No one's inventory system would let

them see who had them in stock; no one was willing to expend the effort to help a customer.

Of course, if you simply go to an online vendor, it's easy to buy a lasso cable and you'll get all sorts of specs, reviews and a pretty precise arrival date.

I believe it's this lack of customer support that's a big factor in the decline of brick-and-mortar stores. At my local mall, a number of major department stores have either closed or are failing. Lord & Taylor—gone. Carson's—about to close. Sears—heck, I'm surprised they didn't shutter their doors years ago. But Nordstrom, which is probably the most expensive of them all, is still going strong (sales up 2.6% in the fourth quarter of last year). And what is Nordstrom known for? Customer service. Best Buy seems to have learned this lesson as well and has built stores-within-stores with knowledgeable salespeople to counter their online competition.

Today, you can sell on price or you can sell on quality and service. Whether you're selling kayak locks, structural steel or design services, you need to decide what your niche is. You can succeed at either end of the spectrum, but it's becoming less and less likely that you'll thrive in the middle. Whether you contact AISC's Steel Solutions Center (solutions@aisc.org or 866.ASK.AISC) or our Certification, membership or education departments, I hope that AISC offers you Nordstrom-level customer service—and I'd love to hear your feedback on how we're doing. Please email me at melnick@aisc.org and let me know!


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