

Think Globally, Act Locally About Laws Affecting Your Business



Elizabeth Larson
Executive Editor

Civic involvement is smart marketing. It's no coincidence that most of the stores nominated for *MER's* Retailer of the Year awards are active civic participants in their communities.

GIVEN THE MAMMOTH SIZE OF THE FEDERAL BUREAUCRACY, IT'S EASY TO FORGET THAT what happens in state and local government is often more important to the health of your business than what transpires in the halls of Congress. In 1996, for example, when Congress was debating a wage increase to \$5.15 an hour, several states and even one city (Denver) had initiatives on their ballots to raise the hourly wage even higher. Lobbying by businesses helped prevent their passage.

Local government not only has a greater impact on your business, in many cases, than the federal government, it is much easier to get involved with. With the noise from poorly installed car alarms making the aftermarket an increasingly easy target, perhaps it's time we began to "think globally, act locally," to borrow the environmental slogan, about laws affecting our industry.

As *MER* reported in July, the New York City council is considering a ban on the sale and installation of audible car alarms. OEM security systems and those installed outside of the Big Apple would be exempt, thus making the law a direct blow to the aftermarket specialist. Car alarms aren't the only aftermarket item stirring up political noise these days either. As has happened elsewhere, Tucson, Ariz., recently passed an ordinance against loud car stereos.

We can react with understandable defensiveness when such legislation is proposed — but that isn't likely to win over too many supporters. Instead, why not consider such proposals as opportunities for retailers to enhance their image as professionals, and perhaps change a mind or two in the process.

When tackling the thorny issue of false alarms, consider that there's no better way to cut short someone's tirade than by saying, "I agree with you completely. False alarms *are* a problem." Point out that the quality of an installation is responsible for at least 80 percent of the success or failure of a security system. Talk about the personal safety features available with aftermarket systems. Mention that experts attribute much of the last decade's decline in auto theft to the increasing use of such systems. Then invite them to work with you to find a different means to the end you both seek: the elimination of false alarms. Homeowners in some cities face stiff penalties after several false house alarms are reported; this concept could work for car alarms too.

When faced with a proposal to curtail the use of car stereos, try shifting the focus to something positive — such as how local police are using cool cars and cooler systems to develop a rapport with at-risk kids. When Phoenix was debating a restriction on car stereos, local members of the mobile electronics industry were instrumental in reducing some of the public outcry by setting up a "jam zone" where kids could show off their cars.

Don't wait for a controversial topic to make the city council agenda before you decide to get active, though. Voice your opinion about topics of general concern to the business community. Make yourself known to members of any business-related committees or task forces. After all, civic involvement is smart marketing, too. When the police department wants stereos for its anti-gang vehicles, or city hall wants vehicle tracking systems for its official fleet, wouldn't you like your store to come to mind immediately?

Think you can't afford the few hours a month this would take? Just remember it's probably no coincidence that most of stores nominated for *MER's* Retailer of the Year awards are active civic participants in their own communities. **MER** elarson@bobit.com