

Racquet Tech

CUSTOMER SERVICE

Constant Evolution

It might be time for small pro shops and home-based stringers to rethink their supply chain.

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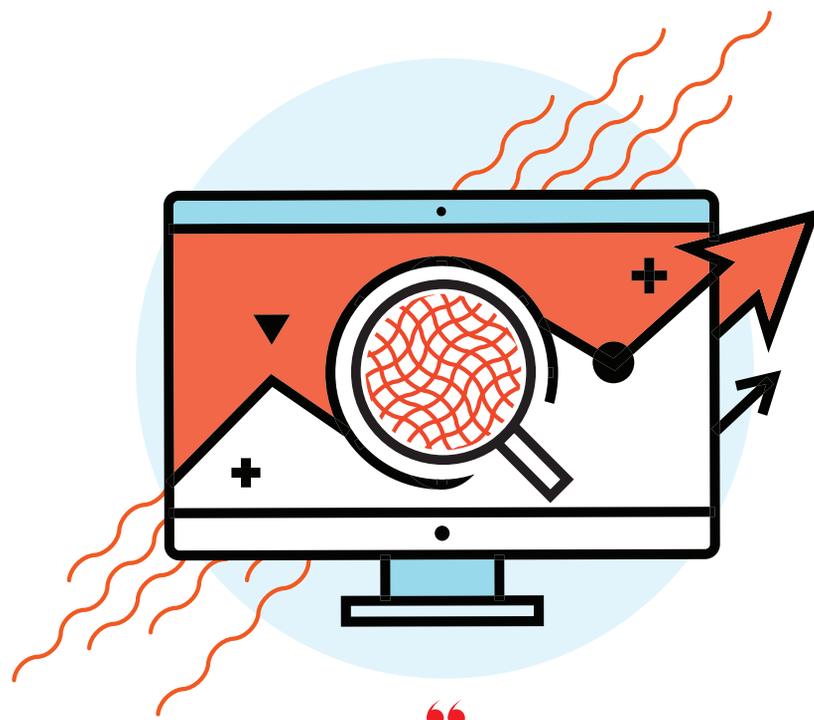
When I started out in this industry in the 1980s as a home-based stringer, I depended on distributors to purchase all of my inventory and supplies. Manufacturers only dealt with large retailers that could meet large minimum purchase requirements and established credit accounts.

There were dozens of suppliers around then, but I usually dealt with only one or two, so that I could take advantage of volume discounts. Even when I opened my retail store, many of the manufacturers' minimum purchases were still beyond my capabilities.

But by the mid-1990s, the business supply chain for our industry began to change as manufacturers began dealing directly with smaller pro shops. The customer pool for wholesale suppliers shrunk significantly and the pricing structure changed, which resulted in many distributors going out of business.

In the 2000s, the internet changed things even more. Many manufacturers now sell direct to consumers, and those that aren't are marketing to them through large, internet-only retailers.

While I can understand how challenging it is to lose a longtime business relationship, things evolve and change—including successful businesses. To my knowledge, only one tennis wholesale distributor remains in the United States: Fromuth Tennis, which has been around for almost 50 years. Its business has changed, adapted and grown with the changing market. But Fromuth still is a family-owned business that specializes in serving small pro shops.



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It might be time to reassess your entire operation and business model, or at least your way of thinking. Most small brick-and-mortar pro shops, and even home-based stringers, consider giant online retailers to be their enemy. But you can use this to your advantage.

Large online retailers buy in volume, so most offer products like string, grips and accessories at “wholesale” pricing. This goes back to the changing structure of the industry. Most small retailers pay the same price even if you have a manufacturer account. These online

giants also offer a wide variety and fast, low-cost shipping.

Your client doesn't care who your supplier is. They come to you for your expertise and service—continue to give them that. If your volume and buying frequency is enough to buy straight from the manufacturer with discounts, do so, but don't abandon a top-selling string or grip because your best supplier is an internet retailer. The bottom line is, consider all your options to provide customers with the very best selection and service possible. ■