

Are you ready to ante up?

Collectible card games offer an easy way to build your customer base

BY DEBBIE SWANSON

In 1993 a new collectible card game, *Magic: The Gathering*, made its debut, and retailers quickly found themselves struggling to keep up with customer demand. Several competitors quickly sent other card games out to the captive market, including *Yu-Gi-Oh!*, *Pokémon*, and *Legend of the Five Rings*. While these didn't achieve the same frenzied heights as *Magic*, they all saw notably high demand.

The hyped-up response lasted about two years before leveling off, but collectible card games (CCGs)—also known as trading card games—are still the object of a magnetic following. For traditional hobby retailers willing to cater to this crowd, a loyal new consumer base may be the result. But like most items in the hobby industry, there's more to successful selling than just maintaining inventory.

Diverse offerings

Because hundreds of unique, artwork-rich cards compose each game, part of the fun for consumers is building up their collections. Intro packs or starter decks serve to intrigue newcomers, while booster packs begin to fill in the gaps. Sold as "blind buy" elements—sealed booster packs keep their contents hidden—they either fuel or frustrate buyers. As players become more engrossed, the quest to obtain specific or rare cards ignites their purchasing.

Jay Ribak, owner of The Relentless Dragon gaming store in Nashua, N.H., says successful retailers need to embrace all of the product offerings. "Not just the packs, decks and other product you get from your distributors, but the singles that you can only get from either opening product or buying from customers," he says. "Buying and selling singles is often one of the most profitable product lines. Most stores buy cards from individuals at anywhere from 30 to 50 percent of market value."



People interested in collectible card games can become loyal customers.

The traditional model of card games—introduced with *Magic*—remains popular, but in 1995 Fantasy Flight Games introduced a new model, living card games (LCGs). To customers, the difference is in the purchasing: LCG sales avoid the element of gamble. Card packages are sold as a complete, self-contained set, referred to as a "core set."

"For example, if a game has a rule that only three of a particular card can appear in a single deck, then the pack comes with three copies of each card," explains Milwaukee gaming enthusiast James Jester.

Fantasy Flight Games' successful LCGs include *Game of Thrones*, *Lord of the Rings* and *Star Wars*. Other companies have released games based on this model, more generically referred to as expandable card games (ECGs). Most retailers offer both types of games to their customers. "Of the two models, [CCGs are] better business for retailers, as you can set up a resale market driven by the rarity of cards," says Jester. "The market for LCGs is better for consumers, which is partly driving its success."

Building loyalty

Maintaining inventory is one factor in customer loyalty. If customers know your store has what they need, they'll return.

Ribak says his store has worked to build a reputation for carrying the most *Magic* singles in the region.

"We carry as many cards as possible, and have them organized in a way that is easy for a customer to find what they are looking for," he says. "Many stores will forgo lower-value cards in favor of higher-value cards. We've taken the opposite approach and stock cards worth as little as 10 cents, as well as cards worth hundreds [of dollars]."

Aside from inventory, paying close attention to your customers is another way to tighten bonds. A large percent of customers are drawn by the social element of the game and will flock to a store that maintains a full calendar of local tournaments or organized play nights, as well as events celebrating new releases. Other customers may be equally dedicated to the game but never surface at an event. Instead, they seek dependable, vast inventory. Finally, both curious newcomers and seasonal shoppers will favor a store where knowledgeable, non-intimidating staff members point them in the right direction.

Ribak says it's all a matter of balance. "I get to know all of my customers' names as they become regulars. It adds an extra touch of welcome that people appreciate. On the other hand, it's also important not to spend too much time with your regulars, to the exclusion of other customers. In a hobby where people drift in and out, newcomers are the lifeblood of a store."

Like selling any niche items, CCG success comes from fostering a careful mix of inventory, environment and customer service. By giving equal attention to each element, your store will soon become a go-to place for a new and loyal pool of shoppers.

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