

Nordstrom benching its pianists

The higher-end retail chain says customers seem to prefer piped-in music

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LAURA GUNDERSON

The Oregonian Staff

Play us a song, piano man -- just somewhere else.

Come the new year, Nordstrom stores will pipe in popular tunes, instead of continuing to air the live piano notes that have lulled many shoppers for the past 20 years.

The Seattle-based chain said the company is carrying out its hyper-attentive approach to customers, who it said compliment canned music more often than live musicians.

Longtime customers, however, say they'll miss the nostalgic, classy touch of live pianists, who set a mood inside the upscale department store unlike most other retail venues.

Jennifer Black, a local retail analyst who had not heard of the change, said ultimately the move is probably financially smart. The 157-store chain plans to make the change at all stores that have live piano players, including three of five in the Portland area.

Nordstrom already has halved pianists' playing time in recent years, some to as little as 15 hours a week nationwide, said Brook White, a Nordstrom spokeswoman. Other, new stores have opened without pianos.

"People associate the pianos with us, but, in fact, what they've been experiencing over the past few years has been overhead music," White said. "We certainly understand that some people are disappointed, and that's something we always hate to do at Nordstrom. But over time, we just evolve our experience."

Decisions on music are being made store by store, but most are cutting back, she said. Stores, she said, may bring back live music for special occasions.

Pianists tickled the ivories in some Portland-area stores from open to close as recently as 2004. But those schedules have been sheared: Five pianists now cover 36 hours a week at stores in downtown Portland and Lloyd Center and 20 hours in Washington Square, White said. The Westfield Vancouver Nordstrom hasn't had a full-time pianist for more than a decade.

Nordstrom pianists earned \$12 to \$16 an hour, said Bruce Fife, president of the Musician's Union, Local 99. However, Nordstrom's players are not part of the union, he said.

Portland shopper Susan Walter said the piano music is part of Nordstrom's attraction.

"It's something we certainly all look forward to," she said. "It's a classy store, and the piano is probably one of the reasons."

Still, as owner of local furniture stores under the name Sofa Table Chair, Walter said she understands how economics could drive the decision.

Earlier this month, Nordstrom reported better-than-expected third-quarter earnings but lowered its profit outlook for the fourth quarter and full year in light of lower sales forecasts.

Black, the retail analyst, said she'll miss the piano music, but the public company must consider profits before ambience.

"We're heading into a tough retail environment, and all retailers are cutting expenses," Black said. "It's nice, but I don't think it's necessary."

Ultimately, Black said, customers probably won't care.

Not so, said retail music expert Brian Rupp, creative director for Rumblefish, a Portland firm that advises companies on how their brands should sound. Although the change in tune might not have an immediate impact on sales one way or another, he said, it could alter shoppers' image of the Nordstrom brand.

"I might stay in the store as long, but my perception of Nordstrom will likely be diminished somewhat," he said. "What's gone is this loss of an experiential element that really transcends music and has more to do with the human presence, a human touch."

Mike Horsfall has played at the Lloyd Center Nordstrom for 17 years. Some folks walk by and don't seem to notice, he said. But then he notices their fingers tap as they ride up the escalator.

"You know you're reaching them then," he said. "Others more clearly react -- like the children and even junior high kids who are trying to be cool. They'll walk by and either move or dance or clap their fingers or do something, which shows that the music has reached them."

Then there are the days people ask him -- mid-song -- where the bathrooms are.

"It's a very social job," he said.

Laura Gunderson: 503-221-8378; lauragunderson@news.oregonian.com

Then This Showed Up!

Outrage at Nordstrom

by David Stabler

Thursday November 29, 2007, 1:13 PM



Robert Bach

Dave Lee's days are numbered at Nordstrom in Washington Square.

Everyone I talk to is mad at Nordstrom for getting rid of its pianists. Last night, a friend told me that she and her co-workers planned to protest. Live music made the stores classy, she said. She completely didn't buy the store's claim that customers preferred canned music.

I don't know anybody who prefers canned music to live. But there's another reason live music is cool. During the holiday season, some Portland piano teachers arranged to have their best students play in stores. It brought smiles to harried shoppers and it gave the kids valuable playing experience. It also made the stores look community-minded.

Nordstrom rarely makes a move as jarring and wrong as this. If you're mad, [tell 'em: 206-628-2111](tel:206-628-2111).

An early comment **Posted by mimieliza on 11/29/07 at 2:14PM** on the Oregonlive web site said, "I'm not happy with this at all. The Nordstrom's pianists are what made me keep practicing as a child - I wanted to grow up to be one of them!"

The pianists are something that sets Nordstroms apart. Lose the pianists, and Nordstroms might as well turn into yet another Macy's clone just like every other department store in the country.