

# Let's Talk (Skate) Shop:

## *How to roll four essays into one.*

by Bud Stratford

I've been a busy, busy boy lately.

On top of my self-designed and self-imposed Midwest tour, I've also had a cavalcade of phone calls lately from dozens of sources and advocates, asking me to step back up to my laptop, and peck out a few well-researched articles. Which, on one hand, is great? At least I have readers, I guess; that's always a bonus when you're a writer. But, on the other hand: These incessant requests do take a pretty big chunk out of my Coke-drinking, cig-smoking, and skateboarding schedules. And, if you know me at all, you'll know that those three things have a dear place in my heart. I take none of them lightly.

So, sitting around tonight, tossing it all over in my head, I realized that each topic that was brought to my attention recently... all revolved in one way or another around skate shops. And their daily struggles, in today's overall skateboard market. "So", I figured to myself, "Instead of pecking away at a multitude of separate essays... why not just roll them all into one, and save myself some well-needed skate time?!" Genius, right?! Hey, it gets even better: It'll save you a hell of a lot of 'reading-time', too. Being the long-winded jackass that I am, you're probably thanking your lucky stars for that one. Hey man, my skin's thick enough to handle the truth. No worries, there.

So, let's begin here:

## **The Strong-arming of Skate Shops**

This has been a perpetual topic of the many phone calls that I've received lately. So, let's hit that one head-on, and right off the bat.

Apparently, there's a few Big Bad Companies out there, that are allegedly... and, I'd like to re-iterate that "allegedly" bit, you'll see why in a second... "Strong-arming" Little Victim Skateshop. Some people get offended by this sort of thing. Thus, they've kindly asked me to check it out. Which, I did.

Here's what happened: I called about 300 skateshops, and asked each one of them if they're being strong-armed by anyone. The resounding answer has consistently been "no". Still, rumors and innuendo keep on flying around. Whatever.

So: Let's assume for a second that, somewhere, in some parallel universe, this is actually *happening*. Well, there's an easy solution to the problem readily at hand

for any and every skate shop out there in our land. What is that solution, you ask?! The answer is: **Stop buying from Big Bad Companies**. Terminate your communications with them, immediately. And, there you have it! Problem solved! It's awfully hard to 'strong-arm' a shop, after all, that won't even take your call. Or, open their door to your sales reps. I'd go one better, and tell them all to fuck the hell off... but, that's just me, I guess. Not everyone is the foul-mouthed asshole that I am; I forget that one pretty much, all the time. I'm sorry.

Now, I can hear you, Mr. Shop Owner, screaming your head off right now. "But, Bud", you'll say, "We **need** Big Bad Company's product in our store! It does well for us, we get great margins on it, and the sell-through is excellent. We can't just tell them to Go Screw". Well, I'm not telling you *not to buy the product*. Just, *don't buy it directly from the source*. That's all.

The answer is, if you really **need a product**- yet, you **don't want to go direct** for whatever reason... and, those reasons could include, your inside salesperson is a jerk, maybe you're paying through the nose for shipping, maybe your orders have a nasty way of getting bunged up on a regular basis, or maybe you're even getting 'strong-armed' by the manufacturer... whatever the case may be, the easy answer is merely to buy that product, somewhere else. Namely, through an independent distributor.

There are, obviously, advantages to this. The obvious one being: Distributors don't strong-arm shops.

And, why is that?! Well, because distributors are impartial and apolitical sellers. They don't care which brands you buy; all they want, is for you to buy **something**. And, if possible: A **whole lotta** somethings. From, **them**. The more brands, and the more product categories, the better. This, of course, is great for your shop, because you get to **easily diversify your product selection and brand mix, with one easy call**. Bonus!

So, if Big Bad Company is bumming you out? Hit them where it hurts: Their Pocketbooks. Steer your business to Reggie at Eastern, or Damien at South Shore, or Art at AWH... or, any one of the other good, reputable, helpful independent distributors out there. Big Bad Company, right off the bat, will be earning less margin on each unit sold... which is quite a punishment for being dicky cheeseheads, isn't it? Chances are when all is said and done, you'll still be paying pretty close to what you're paying right now for your product... and, by rolling those orders into your orders for other product categories, and you may even qualify for free shipping, bakers' dozens, volume discounts, and other perks. Sure, you may lose a little margin here and there. Or, you may even gain a little. You might even begin trying out some new and different products while you're at it, realize that there's a much bigger planet out there than Big Bad Company might have you believe, and add a few new flavors to your little shop. Either way: You save yourself a nasty-sized headache; your arms get to live a long, and un-twisted existence; and, Big Bad Company gets a little kick in the nuts along the way. In my world, that's called a 'win-win-win' sorta situation.

Beautiful!

Next up, we have:

## Price Stability, and MSRP's

Now, this is a topic that shops are talking about a lot these days. I sorta stumbled on it by accident, while I was on my recent legs of my skateshop/skatepark tour.

One of the brands that I brought along with me for the ride was Ninja Bearings, also known as Absolute Speed. Ninja makes a very, very solid product. They asked me to talk to shops a little bit about them, while I was out and about. And, being the accommodating Joe that I am, I happily accepted.

One thing that Ninja has, are very well-defined wholesale prices, as well as very clear MSRP's. If you've been living in a cave for the last 30 years, or flunked Retailing 101, MSRP stands for "Manufacturer's Suggested Retail Pricing".

So, I'm out on the road, talking to shops about Ninja Bearings... and, when the shops would ask me what their pricing is, I wrote it out in two columns. One column, the 'wholesale' price. And, the other column, was 'MSRP'. I didn't think that it was a really huge deal, to make this absolute minimum of effort. Yet, you'd think that I'd just handed these shops Willy Wonka's Golden Ticket or something.

"Ohh... my... gawwwwwwd!", one shop squealed in delight. "An honest-to-goodness, MSRP! How awesome is *that?!?!?*" I don't know? Kinda-awesome, maybe...?

"That is *too awesome!!!!*", shop owner squealed. Then, she actually gave me a hug. A hug! Imagine that! Just for having an MSRP in hand. Go frickin' figure.

Apparently- and, this is strictly going off of what the shops all told me, here- MSRP's... and by that, I mean **available, easy to find, published, and sensible MSRP's**... are rarer than hen's teeth these days. Then, we have another problem that I'll also address here. And, that problem is: The meaninglessness of the few MSRP's that **are** available, easy to find, published, and sensible. What good is an MSRP, if shops are either encouraged- or, in some cases, forced- to **deviate wildly** from the damned MSRP...?!

One shop, for example (which I'll keep anonymous, although they assured me that it'd be entirely cool to quote them on the record) told me that, they are taking huge sales hits, because their online competition deviates so blatantly from MSRP. "Here's one example", they told me. "A kid came in last week, with a complete longboard setup." I'll also leave out the brands, just to save the innocent from getting an unfair beat down from shops. "This board should have retailed for about \$320.00. We sell it here, at our shop, for \$265- just to stay competitive with the online e-tailers..."

"That's a pretty hefty discount", I interrupted.

"Yeah. But, the worst part?! The kid bought the board online- fully assembled- for \$260.00."

"Wait", I asked." You're telling me that the kid would rather order the board online... sight unseen... and, wait a whole week to get it... just to save a measly five bucks?!" I couldn't believe it.

"Yeah", the shop owner confirmed. "What's more, it happens all the time. At least once a week, sometimes two, three times a week."

"That's nuts", said I.

"I agree", said shop owner. "But, that's just the world we're living in these days, I guess".

"So, what's the solution?", I inquired.

"Simple. Have the manufacturers cut off shops... e-tail, or otherwise... that discount too heavily from MSRP."

Now, although this might sound like an incredibly difficult thing to do, I do know for a fact that some of our better manufacturers do, in fact, do just this. If they find a shop- whether that shop is a brick-and-mortar, or an e-tailer- that deviates too far from their suggested pricing... they **will** cut off that retailer in a damn skippy minute. I've seen it firsthand. There are actually quite a few precedents for just this sort of action. So, I have to assume that it's not that hard to do. It's just a question of doing it, that's all.

So, you're probably asking me, "What's the benefit to the manufacturer, to enforce MSRP's [within reason]?" Well, one really good answer is that, the MSRP of your product, in a very real sense, defines a lot of what your product is all about. If you're peddling a "price point" product, for example? Obviously, you're gonna have very low MSRP's. Likewise: If your brand is positioned, and marketed, as a "premium" brand? You're going to have very high MSRP's. So: If a shop is selling a 'premium' branded product, at a 'pricepoint' price? Well, you tell me: What is that doing, in the consumers' eyes...?!

From my vantage point, it's probably doing one of two things. One: It's probably contributing to some Confusion in the Marketplace. Which is bad enough. Or, on the other hand? It might be unnecessarily watering down the value of your brand, in the eyes of the consumer. Which is even worse.

Neither of these, as you can clearly see, is in the vested interests of the brands. Thus, it's actually **in the brands' own interests** to set, and enforce [within reason] reasonable, and accessible, MSRP's.

Lastly, for those manufacturers that choose to sell directly to consumers, via their own company websites: I would highly suggest that, you price your product, on your sites, at full MSRP. The reasons are simple. One, you don't want to be

undercutting your retailers. Secondly: In case your retailers lose their order forms, catalogs... whatever you'll use to publish your MSRP's... a handy visit to your site will help them find 'em again, with just a click or two. This is good customer service at work. This is smart policy. This is, a way to make retailers' lives and jobs much, much easier. And, it'll give retailers a reason to visit your site more often, to boot.

Next up, we have:

## Zumiez

This one is a particular thorn in my side. Why, you ask? Because, Indianapolis was recently blessed with two brand-spankin' new Zumiez stores! Yay for us. Not so yay, for our two long-standing "core retailers". Since, those Zumiez locations just-so-happen to be right up the street, from both of those core retailers.

I'm seeing a lot of just this sort of coincidence, and not just in Indianapolis. I'm seeing it, all over my tour. Wherever there's a core skate shop, there seems to be a Zumiez a mere bottle-rocket-distance away. Coincidence?! Hard sayin', not knowin'. Cool? Definitely not.

I'm just gonna lay it right out there, on the line: I Fucking Hate Zumiez. Now, four months or so ago? I'd hardly heard of 'em. Let alone, had an opinion of them. What a difference a few months makes, eh...?

Here's my problem with Zumiez. And, this is straight from a core retailer that I spoke with early in my tour, who again, shall remain un-named. Even though they, too, told me it was cool if I quoted them on the record.

Here's what he asked me: When is the last time that, Zumiez gave a kid a \$5 or \$10 discount on a deck, just so that they could keep skating?

"I don't know", I said. I wasn't that familiar with the store.

"Well, when's the last time that Wal-Mart gave you a half-price Coke, just 'cuz you looked really parched...?" Oh. Well, never, I guess.

"Right. That's because, the job of a corporation is to make a profit first, and fulfill needs second. How 'bout this: When's the last time that Mopar gave you a discount, for keeping your grades up?"

"Uhhhhhhh.... never?"

"Okay. How about, the last time that Camel flowed you a pack of cigs, just for supporting them for so long...?"

I prefer Djarum Cloves, of course. But still, my answer was the same: Never.

"Or, the last time that you had a major corporation attending a town council meeting, advocating for a local skatepark...?" Never, as far as I know.

"So, you see? That stuff that I mentioned? That's stuff that we, the core shops, do for everyday skaters, all the time. That's what we do for our local scenes, and then some. How does the skateboard industry support us, in return?!"

I have a bad feeling about this one...

"They sell to those bastards!!" 'Those bastards', of course, would be Zumiez. "And, they plop a store right in our backyard, undercut our prices, and just wait until they put us out of business, with their massive buying power, and shareholder equity..."

So, what you're saying is that they're profiting off of your years of hard work?

"Absolutely".

Here's the very clear and present danger for The Industry- and, mark my words on this one: There is a backlash a'coming. I've had more than a few retailers tell me that, when they go to ASR this year, they have a plan. What's the plan, you ask? Well, it's pretty simple.

"I'm going to go to every manufacturers' booth at ASR, with my order forms, catalogs, and checkbook ready to go", one retailer told me. "And, I'm going to sit down with my salesperson, and ask them one question. And, that question will be, 'Do you sell to Zumiez...?'"

"And, if they say 'Yes'?", I asked.

"Then, we're going to close our checkbooks, gather up our catalogs, and leave". No more buying from that manufacturer. End of conversation.

I'd have to suggest at this point that our manufacturing and marketing base might take some time to do a little bit of soul-searching on this issue, because it seems that a tough decision just might be fast at hand. That issue is going to be: Are we going to support our infrastructure of "independent, core retailers", and everything that they do, and represent? Or, are we going to support a corporate-owned, mall skate-store chain, and everything that they do, and represent? At some point, a choice on this issue will have to be made.

Because, as that Mike Brooke character always says, "You can't suck and blow at the same time".

## **Brick-and-Mortars vs. E-Tailers, in the battleground of Product Selection**

Speaking of Brooke, he sent me an essay a few days ago, that he wrote about six years ago. The subject? Choice.

Specifically: Choices, in Skate Shops. Choices of product categories, brands, and price points. The point that he made? Any good, solid, legit skateboard shop

will carry many, many choices of product categories, brands, and price points. Apparently, this is not happening. I did some poking about, to check it all out for myself.

I did a little experiment a couple weeks ago. I went over to Arbor's website, and scoped out their dealer locator... as their dealer locator is one of the biggest around on the internet, as far as 'niche products' go. What I wanted to do was to call a bunch of shops, and gauge how diverse their product lines really are. That would give me a very real indicator of who has what sort of market share these days, as well as how much 'niche skateboarding' has penetrated the average shops' consciousness.

I probably called about 250 skate shops or so. Of which, a dozen or so were Zumiez locations, mind you. What did I find...? That the huge majority of these shops carry Sector Nine and Arbor, almost exclusively. Only a tiny handful carried other brands, such as Ladera, Gravity, GFH, and Loaded. And only a very, very rare few brick-and-mortars were fully stocked with a whole spectrum of brands and choices, reflecting what's currently available in the market, today.

My next logical stop was to compare and contrast this with about fifteen online retailers that I'd heard of. One of those, again, was Zumiez... which, of course, carried Sector Nine exclusively (Arbor was conspicuously absent from Zumiez' website, oddly enough). But, the rest of the 14 that I checked out? Probably carried at least 20 brands apiece. In most cases, even more than that. What a contrast to the brick-and-mortars that I'd surveyed earlier. It was like night and day.

My last task, was to survey as many manufacturers, retailers, e-tailers, and media magnates as possible, and ask them what they thought the current sales split was, between niche products sold online, vs. niche products sold through traditional, brick-and-mortar skate shops. Here, of course, I got a pretty wide spread of opinions, data, matrixes, theories, et cetera. But, the weighted average seemed to be that it was currently about a 30%-70% split, in favor of brick-and-mortars. Which, at first glance, is great for brick-and-mortars. Far better than I'd actually expected.

But then, we have a follow-up fact: E-tailed "niche products" are growing somewhere around 5%-10% a year. While the b&m's are either flat, or losing ground. Several b&m's- as we saw a few topics back- freely admit that their customers are moving to online buying, even when the playing fields are almost exactly the same in terms of pricing, and selection. When the playing field is clearly *lopsided*? Well, I'd guess that in those instances, the problem might be even worse.

"Do you think that the massive product selection that the www offers, has something to do with that...?", I asked several people. The answer was almost exactly the same, regardless of who I was asking. "Oh, absolutely. No doubt about it."

The problem seems to be that, in a world where many shops are offering a very limited selection of products (for whatever reasons, and they do seem to vary quite a bit from shop to shop)... and, at prices that are perceived as being unnecessarily high (the MSRP problem that I outlined above might be contributing to that one, as do local sales taxes, etc.)... of **course**, the trend is gonna be customers beginning a mass migration to online e-tailers. If you can get a much more diverse selection online, and at better prices... well, who the hell wouldn't?! Even I'm guilty of that one, albeit for a very extreme version of this reason: There isn't a "core" shop within miles of me that even stocks the sort of stuff that I skate these days! So, for me, it's not a choice at all. It's a clear necessity.

The other problem that a lot of blokes pointed out, was that: Once customers begin shopping online, and get comfortable with it... well, it becomes very difficult to get them to go **back** to a brick-and-mortar.

"They get spoiled by the selection and the pricing, and the bar gets raised a whole lot", I theorized.

"Yup", everyone confirmed. Even the guy that fixes forklifts at my day job confirmed that one. That's just common knowledge, I guess. Except to techno-fearing dinosaurs (like me).

The challenge for shops, then, will be: To diversify their offerings, while pressuring manufacturers to get that MSRP problem nailed down. But, it doesn't end there.

## The Question of Customer Care

There's one big hurdle left to tackle, head-on. And, this one is entirely in the shops' court.

Let's face a simple fact: Besides a good product selection, at good prices, the shops have one last variable that e-tailers don't really have to contend with. And, that variable is: Kick-Ass Customer Service.

True: To some extent, *everyone* is concerned with customer service. Even e-tailers have to handle the occasional returns, or the stray call-in order. It's not **entirely** outside of their responsibility, to concern themselves with customer care. It's just that, it's much *less* of an issue with an e-tailer, than it is for the brick-and-mortar. Customer service, at the e-tailer level, is widely seen as a "bonus", by most consumers. At the b&m level, it's much more critical. Because here, it's a much, much more integral part of what you do. When everything else is a constant, then it becomes the defining attribute of your shop.

The skate shop of the future, I suspect, is going to look an awful lot like the skate shop of the past. Colorful, clean, tidy, fully stocked with a wide array of hardgoods of all shapes and sizes, for all of those different types of

skateboarding... with a variety of softgoods, and skate shoes that are actually built with 'skateboarding' in mind, as opposed to today's trend of 'fashion-before-function', trend-shoes... and, those shops will be the local experts on everything skateboarding, from decks and wheels, right down to spacers and wedged riser pads. So, if you're a shop owner reading this, and you don't know what the hell a 'spacer', or a 'wedged riser pad' are?! It's high time for you to go back to Skate Setups 101, and figure that shit out. It's your job to know that sort of stuff.

If, and when, your **customers** know more about those sorts of things, than your own **salespeople**? You are in a whole world of trouble. Believe it or not, this is a regular complaint that I hear from skaters, regarding their local skate shops.

This is a problem that the shops themselves, have to directly address, and solve. And the quicker, the better.

## Shop Vs. Shop: How *Not* To Compete

This came up, on my tour. I strolled into a town that had two independent, "core" skate shops. I made a point of visiting them both. I am non-partisan. I'm an equal-opportunity shop-proponent. I support all core shops. Even if they don't always support each other.

The first one that I stopped in at asked me a very simple, honest, straightforward question: "How do I compete with the other shop?", he asked.

"What do you mean...?" Y'gotta admit, that's a pretty open-ended question, right there.

"Well, I need an advantage over 'the other guys'. Should I maybe, lower my prices a bit, to gain a competitive edge...?"

I looked at the boards on the wall, and the corresponding prices. They were already, pretty damned low. This guy was already taking a margins hit, right off the bat. I really couldn't imagine this dude actually lowering prices any more than he had, already.

How did I answer the question? "Whatever you do, **do not compete solely on price**. Ever, ever, ever".

He looked at me kinda funny. "Why not?", he asked.

Here's why. And, I've seen this happen, firsthand. Many, many times. Too many times, in my book.

When you have two shops, in fairly close proximity to each other... and, we'll assume the very worst here, and add that these shops might be bitter enemies, and have some really bad blood between them... the first, knee-jerk reaction is to try to smite the competition out of existence. The easiest... and at first sight, most effective way to do this... is to price their asses right out of business. Which is, a

reasonable enough assumption to make, I suppose. But, it is unfortunately- at the very **best**- a somewhat effective short-term tactic that does **not** lend itself to a healthy, long-term strategic plan.

The problem is that, when you lower prices below a "reasonable" threshold, strictly to gain a temporary, competitive advantage... and, we both know that that 'other' shop is gonna react in kind, and do the same dumb thing that you just did... you're also sacrificing margin dollars that your shop desperately needs to pay the bills, keep knowledgeable employees on staff, cover the rent, etc, etc, etc. So, in a sense, you're cutting off your nose, to spite your face. In a short-sighted attempt to spite the competition, you're also contributing to putting yourself out of business. That is why, it's just not the best of ideas.

No: It's far better, smarter, and *wiser* to **differentiate** yourself from your competition, while keeping margins high. If the shop down the street sells a lot of Dwindle, Element, and Zero? Then you can stock Real, Krooked, Crimson, and Santa Cruz. If they're more "mainstream"? Then, you can opt to be more "core". If they're left-wing zealots? Then, you can be a Reagan-Republican. If they're strictly "street"? Then, you can opt to cultivate a longboard scene in your town. *Compete on customer care, product selection, and the overall shopping experience. "Don't Be Dumb; Be Different!"* - that's my mantra.

The truth of the matter is, the first reaction to these things is almost never, the right decision to make. Competing on price, and price alone, only leads to Mutually Assured Destruction. The net affect just might be both shops going out of business, and a damned Zumiez swooping in to profit off of your idiocy.

I doubt anyone really wants that.

## **BRA, aka, Board Retailers' Association**

Last issue of the essay, I swear.

Okay, first, a disclaimer: I really wanted to get a hold of BRA myself, before I addressed this in the essay. They were, however, out of the office, and unavailable for comment, for quite some time. Sorry, guys (and, gals). But, I did at least try.

So, let's talk about BRA, to BRA. The Board Retailers' Association. A good group of folks, that stand up for retailers' issues. And, that is a noble cause to be supported. However, there are things that could be addressed. And, I have spent time talking to shops on this, as well.

BRA- if you don't know this, already- is an organization that advocates for shop owners' issues, to the 'skateboard industry', ie, other shops, and our manufacturers, distributors, etc. Like I said, it's a noble cause. But, does it work, for most shops, on a day-to-day basis? The answer from most shops that I spoke to, is: No. It doesn't.

So, what's the problem?! Well, I've heard a few:

- First of all, it costs money to join BRA. This automatically makes shops a bit hesitant, right off the bat. Couple that with,
- It's not entirely clear, what shops are getting for their money. Then, we have
- There's no published member list, of who else is a BRA Member, and
- By BRA's own website data, they only have about 300 members. Which is only about 10% of all the shops in the country. Which makes the other 90% of shops question their effectiveness. Then, we'll add that:
- There's a perception that, BRA doesn't stand up for all shops, big and small. Lastly, we have the fact that:
- BRA serves not only skate shops, but surf and snowboard shops as well, and they do not necessarily have common issues. So, the question of 'prioritization' comes into play. Which issues, exactly, is BRA tackling these days?!

No one seems to know.

Are all of these true, fair, and accurate perceptions of what BRA is all about? Well, the problem is, it doesn't matter what the truth is. It's the perception that counts. And, unfortunately, that list up there sums up the perceptions, mighty fast.

On the other hand, shops... and, again, I'm speaking about "independent, core skate retailers" here, I'm sure that Zumiez, with their 240+ shops, and bazillions of shareholders, can probably stand up just fine for their own damn selves... **do** need to realize that, sooner or later, they **are** going to have to learn to work together toward common goals, as a united front. Whether it's via an organization like BRA, or an alternative organization, is an open question. It's not mine to answer. I'm just the messenger. You guys have to figure that one out on your own.

I talked to quite a few shops about this, in detail. And, shops do have a lot of concerns about their futures. They do vocalize these concerns... at least, they did to me. Not that I'm in a position to help or anything.

"Why don't you join BRA, then...?!", I'd ask. And, usually, I got one of the answers that I outlined above.

"So, what are you gonna **do** then? Just, resign yourself to whatever circumstance, e-tailers, Zumiez, and the manufacturers, decide for you...?!"

"Well, what else **can** I do...?!?!"

Well, for one, we- as shop owners, and advocates- could just say 'screw it!', and form our own organization. One that addresses the problems that I outlined

above. Don't wanna pay \$150 a year to join BRA? Make a free-to-join organization by and for skate shops, then. Take some initiative. Make it happen. Do something.

"That's much, much easier said than done..." is the usual reply. My question? "Is it **really**...?"

The fact is very simple. In this day and age of critical issues at hand, and an uncertain future, it is **far** more of a risk to tell me shit like, "Well, it's easier said than done...", and do **nothing**... than it is to take an initiative, and so **something**. I doubt that you'll find anyone that would argue with me, on that one.

And, you'd be hard pressed to find anyone that will argue with this one, either: There Is Strength, In Numbers. That is an age-old truth that just can't be denied. I even told one shop, "Look. If you're pissed off about margins on hardgoods?" I believe that the topic, of course, was overall profitability of his shop... "...the fact is that **you**, speaking **alone**, to a **single manufacturer**, about **your little problem**, isn't going to accomplish jack shit, in the grand scheme of things. However...", I went on, "... if you, and 2,999 other shops, all ganged up on IASC, as a combined voice? You'd probably get better margins tomorrow..."

And, it's true. If one dude... and, that "dude" would be Neal Boyd, in my opinion... could wrangle up a mere \$30 or so, spend a few hours pecking away at a keyboard, building a simple little, 5-page website... and in the process, almost single-handedly bring down IASC's "Blank Initiative"...? Well, shit! What the hell kind of damage could the combined efforts of 3,000 independent skate shops do?! In my opinion, that's a damn interesting question. Don't you agree...?!

As the old adage goes: There's no better time than the present. And, I doubt that we really have the time to lose, at this point. Times are tough, skateboarding is in a lull, and already, shops have gone belly up. The time for change, is now. And, the first guy in line to make that change happen, is you. Get on it, or get your ass kicked. The choice is yours.

***I strongly recommend that all shops- regardless of size, or location- at the very least, call BRA, and ask them some questions about what they're doing, and what they can do to help you. They want your input, they're nice enough folks, and supporting you is their job. E-mail Melissa Clary at [melissa@boardretailers.org](mailto:melissa@boardretailers.org), or phone her at 910-509-0109, ext. 1005.***

***If you wanna send some well-deserved hate mail to this joker, well, his e-mail address is [budstratford@aol.com](mailto:budstratford@aol.com). Don't say we didn't tell ya so, 'cuz we totally did.***

***And, for pete's sakes, please: Support your local skate shop whenever possible. If they go the way of the Edsel, well, who's gonna be left to support your local scene? Think about it. Bye.***