

Despite the assurances, a retailer who has experienced difficulty obtaining stock for his shelves, particularly during peak selling season, probably isn't convinced everything that could be done by manufacturers is being done.

"It's the independents in this industry that helped make the brands into the powerhouses they are," said Jeff Milligan of Cattleman Western Store in Alvin, Texas. "I am one for investigating the new kids on the block in Western and diversifying our product mix in order to up the bottom line on goods found only in authentic Western stores."

Milligan said he believes there are regional manufacturers willing to "maintain loyalty to the real deal" and he will try to do more business with them.

One of those companies is the newest face in the Western footwear sector of the industry.

"What the retailer is telling you is the same story I heard over and over when I was in management in my prior life," said Bob Frazier, owner of Twisted X Boots. "It's a fact of life that when the numbers control your business, you have to grow your top line—sometimes, as fast as you can to keep investors happy. The sad part is that the independent retailer has taken a back seat in the industry that they've built," he added.

Terri Alger, a retailer in Waverly, N.Y., said she experienced difficulties obtaining certain boots during the holiday season.

"We sell a lot of boots in our store, and I have bought from these same wholesalers for many years," she said. "It is very frustrating."

Alger has been around long enough to remember the last Western craze. The hot product during the Urban Cowboy period was hats. Today it's boots.

"I love Western and have sold it for 36 years," she said. "The only thing that helps me stay in business is that I sell related items as well, such as gifts and home decor."

Margie Levene, another retailer, also spent some sleepless nights during the holiday season, wondering whether boots she had ordered would be shipped.

While she doesn't begrudge a boot-maker to sell to the market it chooses, Levene's plea is for honest communication.

"While I understand that a supplier may or may not have been able to control the sudden huge demand for boots, the boot companies can, however, control salesmen promising us that boots would arrive by certain dates, only to tell us it would be months later."

When delivery dates aren't met, retailers lose face with consumers.

"For us, this is a way of life, not a passing fad," Levene added. "We will be the ones still buying boots two, three, five and 10 years from now, and like my customers, I have a very long memory." 🐾



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Boot Images: On the front cover of this month's issue are a variety of boots from Ariat, Justin and Durango. Within the pages of this feature are a number of images of boots purchased by the Tack 'n Togs staff at various mainstream department stores. In some instances, the quality issues with the "copycat" boots are obvious. Others are of equal quality to what consumers might find inside the traditional Western footwear industry. Teaching consumers the difference, and attracting them to the "real deal" Western brands and the retail stores that sell them, has been a challenge over the past couple years.