SUSPENSION PREVENTION

Get Reinstated and Protect Your Amazon Seller Account

CYNTHIA G STINE
SUSPENSION PREVENTION:
Get Reinstated and Protect Your Amazon Seller Account

By Cynthia G. Stine
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Because Amazon’s rules, policies and procedures relating to its third-party sellers change often, the reader is advised to rely on advice given from Amazon over this book if there is ever a conflict. In addition, because Amazon does not share its proprietary algorithms, operations or business practices with outsiders, all insight gleaned by the author is based on observation rather than direct knowledge from the company. Speculation and guesswork also go into understanding what Amazon wants from its third-party sellers in terms of a Plan of Action.

At the time of this publishing, this information was accurate to the best of the author’s knowledge.

Because each factual situation is different, specific advice should be tailored to the particular circumstances. For this reason, the reader is advised to consult with his or her own advisor regarding that individual's specific situation.

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While the odds of you permanently losing your Amazon business because of a seller suspension is relatively small, the risk is real and the information you’ve likely gotten up until now on this topic is probably a mixed bag of poorly explained truths and rational sounding misinformation.

This book removes all confusion. It’s your guide to avoiding suspension and also getting reinstated if/when it happens to you.

Learning and understanding the policies is step one of course, but there’s more to the story (isn’t there always). This shouldn’t surprise anyone.

My team and I have been teaching online entrepreneurs the merits of multiple income streams since 2002. When you put “all your eggs in one basket” online, you could be asking for trouble no matter how “cleanly” you play the game. It’s been true with YouTube, Facebook, PayPal, Google, eBay and yes, now Amazon. These big companies can feel somewhat heartless when they write their ever shifting and overlapping policies and then seemingly randomly drop the hammer on unsuspecting users who have no real recourse except to beg (which often works quite nicely I might add).

Yes, it pays to know the rules, but more importantly it REALLY pays to know how the game is played.

This book is your guide to playing the game well on Amazon. Cynthia has become a go-to source of reliable information and insight in the arena of Amazon seller suspensions and her track record of helping sellers get reinstated is second to none. She and her team can be trusted.

Do you want to avoid an Amazon seller suspension or get reinstated as fast as possible? If so, then you’ll need to learn and follow Amazon’s rules, but also learn and follow this book.

Jim Cockrum
JIM COCKRUM
Best-selling business author and online entrepreneur
JimCockrum.com
Verity Mawkyard read her email in disbelief. Her heart started pounding and her anxiety threatened to consume her. Suspended for selling counterfeit items. How could this be true? She bought everything from retail stores! Her items were New. Two of the items on the list she had, in fact, never even sold before! How could Amazon do this? She was guilty until proven innocent, and it was infuriating. Her integrity was being called into question, and everything she was trying to build was crumbling in those three words: “selling counterfeit items.”

George Muzzle watched in horror over the course of a few hours as the rest of his Amazon accounts – U.S., Canada, U.K., and Mexico – disappeared because his France account had been suspended for shipping problems: hundreds of thousands of dollars a month worth of sales were gone for something he thought he had fixed by switching to a new shipping service. Surely Amazon didn’t expect everything to be better in a day? Why would they stop his sales on the other platforms where he had such great metrics?

“I’ve had enough!” said Joly Stick. “Someone’s going to pay for this.” It was the fourth time he’d been suspended, and he knew exactly what was going on and who was doing it. He’d gotten it resolved before with Amazon, and it infuriated him that there was no institutional memory whatsoever. No one who could say, “Oh wait, we already resolved this issue in Joly’s favor.” No one who could look at his account and say, “Oh, this is a competitor not a customer.” All his competitor had to do was file a policy violation, and Joly was suspended again, and again, and again. Not anymore. They messed with the wrong goombah this time.

Betrayal, anger, grief and panic can be overwhelming when you’ve been suspended. Most of my clients have experienced all these feelings during the process. But Joly and his fellow sellers were not quitters. They had something to fight for, and they came out swinging. They weren’t perfect sellers, but they didn’t deserve this either. They picked up the phone, and they did something about it. They called us.

Their stories represent only a few of the more than 100 sellers we’ve helped to fight back in the past year. This book is a view from the trenches, while the war is waging overhead. You are holding the very latest in reinstatement intelligence in your hands – gathered at great emotional cost from our clients. We figured it out the hard way – through experience. Because Amazon won’t be clear, direct, logical, reasonable or helpful in any way, you are on your own if you are suspended or banned from the platform.

We think this is a terrible injustice to Amazon’s third-party sellers. We think the two-to-three-week backlog they have on responses to some appeals is reprehensible, and the ongoing series of horrific technology “glitches” we have seen them make is scandalous.

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¹ My thanks to Charles Dickens for creating such awesome fictitious names. That man knew about pain, and you can tell even in how he names things. All names and situations have been changed and mixed up to protect my clients. They’ve suffered enough.
Who are we? We are the consulting team at *Online Sales Step by Step*. We are all former business consultants, and three of us have been third-party sellers on Amazon for the past five years. Our founder Cynthia Stine started consulting on the side three years ago to help new FBA sellers get started. Fall 2014 is when she got her first client reinstated ... and then another and then another. Through her work with Joly Stick, she began to realize something was seriously wrong with the suspension process, and that the cards are badly stacked against third-party sellers. It started as a trickle that became a flood of suspended sellers by summer 2015.

Now Cynthia’s selling business is on the side, and her consulting practice is full-time. We are growing rapidly to meet the demand. If you need us, we can be found at: http://onlinesalesstepbystep.com. Our hope with this book is that you will never need us for reinstatement services. It was written at a furious pace to try to stem the tide of Amazon account suspensions.

We see it as part of our company goal of *Suspension Prevention*. You may think this battle does not concern you. We assure you it does. No one is too big, too squeaky clean, too tied-in to Amazon to not get caught by the suspension robots. Your best strategy is to be proactive. Forewarned is forearmed.

Amazon doesn’t share information, so our conclusions are based on observation and experience. Things change weekly at Amazon in terms of reinstatements. Reinstatements were much faster and more easily accomplished only a few months ago. We will provide updates through our blog.

While all of this sounds scary, take heart! Our success rate is very good. The vast majority of our clients are eventually reinstated. The email from hell is not the final word .... Even when it says it is the final word.
Introduction

Every day, dozens to hundreds of (mostly) decent sellers get suspended or banned from the Amazon platform worldwide. How do I know that? I’m estimating based on how many of them call me every day. I assume that most of those suspended will write their own appeals, and only a fraction will call me or one of my competitors for help.

In fact, very few Amazon sellers ever call on me when they are first suspended and still have access to the appeal button. I get the texts, emails and calls usually after they’ve failed their own appeals. At the point they call me, they have been denied (at best) or banned … even if they don’t realize it.

Suspended means you still have a chance to write an appeal. Denied means that appeal was denied but you may still be able to re-submit a revised version of your Plan of Action. Banned is when Amazon sends you the letter telling you that your appeal has failed and they will no longer read your emails. Usually in this email they tell you when you’ll get your money back and that it is against Amazon policy for you to open another account.

What my clients realize loud and clear is that they are losing tens of thousands of dollars a day to hundreds of thousands of dollars a week (some of them) during their time away from the platform. They have inventory that isn’t turning, employees that they have to layoff, loans that need to be paid … this is no small matter to most of my clients. They aren’t sleeping, they can’t work, and they are seriously freaked out. I get desperate texts at 2 a.m., many of which I’m awake for because I’m still writing appeal letters.

That Amazon uses such a blunt cudgel to get a seller’s attention is depressing and upsetting to me as a fellow seller. It is not very partner-like, friendly or supportive. The fact that my clients can’t talk to someone about their situation is maddening. They are abandoned by their selling partner and treated coldly. They don’t understand what they did wrong, and Amazon’s suspension letter confuses them. I would, perhaps, feel Amazon was justified if my clients had committed some terrible sin against Amazon or its customers, but 90% of the time that is simply not the case.

Sellers are being suspended because of the rise of the robots at Amazon and the company’s culture of “purposeful Darwinism” that regularly culls employees and poorly performing partners. Seller’s accounts are being flagged because of keywords and activities by malicious competitors.

Of all the things wrong with suspensions, this is probably the greatest sin by Amazon in my eyes. No seller should have that kind of power over another seller’s account. But because everything is automated, anyone who has figured out the system can get another seller kicked off the platform pretty easily. You would not, for example, want to get on my bad side. I have learned how to fight back – something I do regularly for my clients once we get them reinstated.

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Suspension by robot is followed by an auto-letter that may or may not have something to do with the actual reason a seller is suspended. What we’ve learned after more than 100 successful reinstatements (this book was written in summer 2015) is that the suspension letter is usually the tip of the iceberg.

The suspension letter lists ASINs with problems. But another phrase in the letter reveals that this is not the whole story. “Here are some examples (my emphasis) of your listings that we believe violate this policy.” At that point, they list some ASINs that triggered the robots. Later in the letter, they usually tell you to check your account to see what else you can find. Based on that vague direction, you are now expected to create a Plan of Action that tells Amazon why this problem will never happen again on your account.

I feel especially badly for my clients who went to Facebook or the Amazon seller forums for help first. Most of them are crucified by a seller community that does not understand the new reality. The reason suspensions have jumped so dramatically isn’t that there are a bunch of shifty sellers finally getting caught (I wish!). Rather, there are good sellers getting caught up in the net designed to catch poor performers.

My clients are often given bad advice by other sellers. These friendly advisors may be sharing information based on their own experience from months to years ago, before the system was so aggressively set to suspend. They are told to write in bullets and keep their plan to less than a page – which would be a disaster for many of my clients. They are told to write form letters rather than letters with specifics. They are told to write Jeff Bezos – a huge mistake if their Plans are not ready. They are told to grovel, plead, lie and/or open new accounts, among other things. They are told that you can’t get reinstated unless you know someone on the inside (FALSE). They are told that you can’t get reinstated after being banned (NOT true).

They are often told that you only get one suspension so if you are suspended again, you are out. This is not always true either. If you keep getting suspended for the same reason, I suspect it might be true. However, clients that I’ve reinstated multiple times were suspended for different reasons each time.

These are myths. My clients stand on their feet and tell the truth. We get them reinstated based on their merits, not on lies or tricks. I will show you how we do that in this book. I will dispel some common misunderstandings about suspensions and Plans of Action.

While Amazon has always had suspensions and banned sellers, I trace the rise of the robots back to fall 2014, when Amazon undertook a major upgrade to several of its seller systems including the feedback removal system. I have consulted with Amazon sellers for years about improving their businesses. Fall 2014 is when I started to get suspended clients.

I am tremendously grateful to my early clients. We were in uncharted waters, and we experimented. When something didn’t work, we tried again. We learned from every encounter. Persistence won the day. Our Plans got tighter and better. What you hold in your hands is thanks to the patience, faith and trust of dozens of sellers who believed in me.

It is my hope that my clients’ stories will inspire, relieve and motivate you. Whatever state your Amazon business is in, it can probably be better. You don’t have to be suspended or banned to benefit from this book. In fact, I hope that this book will serve as an early-warning system for my readers. I hope that you
never have to call me or my team because instead, you caught problems early and fixed them before Amazon suspended your account.

If you are suspended, I hope this book helps you get reinstated without my help. What?? Yes. I've done my best with this book to make you successful without me. Despite training five people to help, my backlog is a week as of this writing. It distresses my team that we can’t jump on them faster despite working 12+ hour days. We all look at this book as a way to help the simpler suspensions get resolved and to focus our attention on the more complicated, larger cases.

In the complete version of *Suspension Prevention*, I share my approach and mindset. I show you techniques that work and exactly what we think Amazon is looking for in a Plan of Action. The entire book is approximately 250 pages and covers “The Rise of the Robots” which describes what is happening and why so many sellers are getting suspended, “Suspension Prevention” which gives you steps you can take today to keep the suspension robots away and “Get Clean, Stay Clean” which gives you a plan of your own to continue to stay out of trouble with Amazon.

This excerpt – exclusively prepared for Jim Cockrum’s readers – covers Part II: Suspension Prevention – Chapter 6. In addition, I include a glossary.

If you like what you see, grab your copy of the book when it comes out at the end of September. A quick sign-up form will let you be among the first to buy the book – plus qualify for special launch deals! You will find many real-world examples from my client files as well as advice that has succeeded in getting my clients reinstated.

Part I: Rise of the Robots

*Chapter 1: Rise of the Robots*
*Chapter 2: Not Paying Attention*
*Chapter 3: Performance Notifications – Achilles Heel of Merchant Sellers*
*Chapter 4: Policy Violations*
*Chapter 5: Dirty Tricks*

Part II: Suspension Prevention

*Chapter 6: Reclaim Your Account*

Part III: Get Clean, Stay Clean

*Chapter 7: Get Clean Stay Clean*
*Chapter 8: Against Amazon Policy*

Glossary of Terms

Amazon’s Policies

Your Contract With Amazon

Exclusive Reader Resources in the Reinstatement Center
Suspension Prevention: Reclaim Your Account

“I haven’t slept in days.” “I just fired two more employees today.” “I’m declaring bankruptcy on Monday.” “I don’t know how to tell my employees what happened.” How many times have I heard heartbreaking stories like that in the past few months? How many texts and calls have I gotten after midnight? How many people have cried on the phone with me? The answer is “way too many.” Amazon’s decisions don’t just affect sellers. They affect entire communities and families.

There is a heightened anxiety among the Amazon seller community right now. People are getting suspended every day. Those who haven’t been suspended wonder if they’re next. Sellers feel helpless. Even those who have been successfully reinstated are anxious. Their confidence in themselves to manage their accounts and to solve business problems has been shaken. They’ve been faced with a cold, heartless, irrational beast that they used to think was a friendly partner. Traumatized comes close to describing it, but that word isn’t big enough.

As of this writing, there are five sellers I was not able to reinstate. Three of them really upset me. Two were longshots from the beginning and knew it, but the other three didn’t deserve what happened to them. Their “crimes” weren’t any more heinous than anyone else’s. They failed because there is no one behind the curtain looking deeply and carefully into each situation. I’m not dissembling the workers at Amazon. They have their orders, their processes and their marching orders. They are not rewarded for creative thinking, and they are not authorized to make exceptions. I am angry at the soulless system.

Amazon loves its customers but seems to forget that its sellers are customers and people too – people who usually work pretty damn hard and make Amazon a lot of money. One of my unsuccessful reinstatements was a small retail arbitrage seller who had the wrong receipt. It didn’t have the UPC code on it. Nothing we said changed Amazon’s position. Even with a picture of the price tag (with the store’s internal product number) compared to the receipt was not good enough. It was so unjust that I still feel bitter. My client was not a counterfeit seller. She was buying from retail stores, for Pete’s sake!

Mrs. Sowerberry couldn’t understand it. She had submitted invoice after invoice to Amazon – exactly as they asked – and still they denied her appeal! It slowly dawned on her. She was banned! They weren’t going to read any more appeals from her. After 10 years and $10M a year worth of sales it couldn’t just be over, could it? And she did everything they asked … didn’t she? She was dizzy and exhausted from thinking in circles.

It is too late for her and the other four, but it is not too late for you.
Knowledge is power. Awareness is warning. Action is prevention.

This section is about you taking it back – your account, your business, your sleep, your health, your life. If you are suspended, I hope what you learn here helps you get reinstated. If you are not suspended, I hope this section empowers you. For all of you wondering if another suspension will drop on your head like an anvil, there are steps you can take to protect yourself.

For some of you, this will be a tough section. You will reject what I’m saying. It is hard to realize and admit that your own business processes may be putting you at risk. You don’t want to hear that practices that used to be fine on Amazon.com or in your previous life and on other platforms don’t work here. I understand that. That is why Amazon suspends. Suspension is a crude instrument that batters the innocent alongside the guilty, but it certainly makes a seller compliant and open to hearing new things. My hope for you is that you don’t need to be suspended to learn new things.

Some of these actions may or may not apply to your situation. With so much seller variation on the platform it is challenging to be universal in my advice:

**STEP ONE: Take Responsibility**

Amazon is not interested in excuses – no matter how valid – or claims that someone is out to get you. What they want to know is that you take responsibility and will fix the problem. Most of our Plans get approved, I believe, because my clients state exactly what they did and what happened. They tell about the mistakes they made. They learn from their experiences.

Remember when I said earlier that I can deal with almost anything as long as it is the truth? I have gotten clients reinstated who were selling counterfeit; who bought from illegal sources; who had the worst customer service I have ever, ever seen; who tried to trump up invoices; who sold expired, used, stale, dirty and broken items again and again and again. They cheated their customers. They sold in foreign markets with no idea of what they were doing.

When they understood how Amazon saw them, and when they understood how their customers were affected, they felt badly. They took responsibility, and they cleaned up their act. One of my colleagues once said to me, “Do you think any of these guys actually implement their plans, or is it just lip service to get reinstated?” I told him, “They know that if they don’t, they’ll be suspended again.” And most of them do implement their plans. How do I know this? Because we help them do it. I talk more about that in section three.

My point here is that my clients not only take responsibility for what happened, they fix the problem. That is true responsibility, not lip service. If Amazon sends you a policy warning, or if your performance metrics take a dive, jump on it. Fix it. Tell Amazon what you are doing. It will go a long way in your favor if you are suspended and might even keep you from being suspended.

When you look at your own account and feel helpless, remember that you are not. You are responsible. You can find the trouble spots and fix them. You can improve your metrics and your customers’ experiences. You can be the partner that Amazon wants, but first you have to accept that it is your responsibility to do so.
STEP TWO: Be Humble and Teachable - It Probably IS Your Fault

As a group, my clients are extraordinary business people. While they may be captains of industry (in some cases), they are also practical people. They may not like what I have to say, but they listen. They recognize that they’ve made mistakes before, so they may be wrong in this situation, too.

Often they will say to us, “Tell me what I need to do and I’ll do it.” I really wish that Jeff Bezos and the other customer maniacs at Amazon could see how fabulous their sellers are. Not perfect, but fabulous all the same. They work their asses off to get reinstated, not only for the money that is being held hostage, but because they worry about their employees. Every client-employer I’ve worked with paid his/her employees while suspended for as long as they could. Some took cash out of their personal accounts to keep their employees going.

When you get a warning from or if you get suspended by Amazon, you will probably be mad. This is natural. After your emotions calm a little bit, try to see what Amazon is attempting to do with the suspension. Is there a process that could be improved? Is there something more you could be doing for your customers? Is it time to move some inventory to FBA? Be teachable. It probably is your fault. With only a few exceptions, my clients had made mistakes that contributed to their suspension.

It wasn’t as out of the blue as they thought. They just didn’t see the signs. You are in a better position than they were before they got suspended. You can find the signs and make the changes now.

STEP THREE: Read Your Amazon Reports

Amazon provides a bewildering number of reports to its sellers, and it hides the most important ones. Go figure. It would be so helpful if they would provide a report showing you how many hard and soft hits you have on your account at any given moment but they don’t. We have to find them ourselves. When we have a new client, the first thing we do is an assessment. This gives us insight into what is actually happening with the account.

The first three reports we pull are the Imperfect Orders report, the Negative Feedback report and the Returns report. We also read all their customer inquiries for as far back as it takes for us to understand what our client’s customers are saying to Amazon about our client.

Imperfect Orders is what Amazon calls any order where a customer contacts you or Amazon for any reason. This can be as simple as an email inquiry or as serious as an A-to-Z claim. Returns and negative feedback are also included. On a spreadsheet, you can quickly see what kind of problem you have the most. (It is usually returns but not always.) If you are having a lot of problems with a particular ASIN, we can see it here. The Imperfect Orders report is our starting point – the compass pointing in the right direction.

Negative Feedback is where a lot of your customer complaints are coming from, of course. Someone says you are selling Used as New? It is probably in this report. Once you find the complaint, you can delve into the situation and find out what happened. Is it damage in shipping? Poor packaging? This is where you begin. If you are one of those sellers who quickly gets negative feedback removed, you will need to view
your deleted feedback as well as current. It is possible the robots are triggering off a keyword in a removed feedback.

If you scroll through your negative feedback on your screen in Seller Central, you will also see the removed feedback. If you use Feedback Genius, you can see your removed and current negative feedback on one report.

**Returns** has two locations in your Seller Central, depending on whether you sell MF or FBA. You’ll find it under fulfillment reports (FBA) and orders (MF). If you are both, you will have both. For some reason, Amazon gives its MF sellers a lot more to work with. The FBA report shows you the reason the customer chose for the return, but not their complaint. The MF report will often have quotes and details like the negative feedback report. It makes sense if you think about it because if Amazon is handling your returns, they aren’t going to ding you for FBA issues like damage in shipping, so the specific customer complaint is irrelevant. They WILL ding the MF guys, of course.

This report can be a rich source of information about problem ASINs. If you see someone returning multiples of one ASIN in a day, you know to suspect evil seller activity on that ASIN. If you see a lot of returns for an ASIN in general, you need to find out what is going on. Giving Amazon invoices for your inventory isn’t enough if your customers all legitimately suspect an item is fake. Think about the situation previously cited. Is there something going on here that you should fix?

What I’ll usually see in an FBA returns report is a lot of Defective, Damaged in Shipping and Not as Described. Once again, I’m looking to see if there are any ASINs that are causing a disproportionate percentage of the returns. Yes, some of the buyers are lying to get free return shipping. You have to let that go if you can. It will only aggravate you. If it is clear they are lying (they told you one thing and Amazon another), then report them and move on.

**A-to-Z Claims** reports are only available to MF sellers. If you are FBA, your customers are not allowed to file A-to-Z claims. Amazon takes care of them. I’ve seen accounts with dozens to nearly 100 A-to-Z claims in 90 days. Let me tell you now, that report should have zero claims that Amazon had to address. Not zero A-to-Z claims – those are part of business – but zero where they had to refund and close the claim.

When one of these claims is filed, Amazon is not your mediator. They are your punisher. You can and should tell them what happened if there is a side to the story that is missing. However, you need to take care of the customer first and fast. If Amazon closes the case, it counts against you. If you refund the customer first, they don’t count the A-to-Z claim against you.

Because I’ve seen a lot of misinformation about this online, let me repeat again: it all stays on your record as happening, but ONLY the cases Amazon closes and refunds are counted against you. Since each Amazon-closed claim is -500 to your metrics, this is an important point. Unlike negative feedback, you can’t come back and fix it later.

**Messages** are not a report, but they are real-time information for you. This is where your customers contact you through the platform asking questions, wanting refunds, complaining and so on. We have seen both appalling and awesome customer service. The companies who do it best have polite, thoughtful form letters
that they use over and over again. At worst, we see sellers arguing with their customers, accusing them of lying (and worse), paying only measly partial refunds when it is their (the sellers’) fault and much more.

**STEP FOUR: Keep Track of Your Metrics**

In addition to keeping track of customer complaints, you need to keep a close, close eye on your performance metrics. This is more relevant to MF sellers than FBA, but even FBA sellers are vulnerable to faulty products and negative feedback.

Amazon’s rules about late shipments have changed in the past year, for example. It used to be that a shipment counted as shipped when you uploaded the tracking code. Now it doesn’t count until the carrier picks up and scans the package. That is a huge difference that immediately turned good sellers into poor sellers overnight. Many sellers would upload tracking at the end of the day, and have pick up the next. Now their inventory is considered late if they do that. I tell them to make UPS come in the evening or to deliver their packages themselves to the late-night drop off if they have to.

A client of mine on the East Coast who used a drop shipper to send out his orders often didn’t upload shipping data until the next morning because of the time difference. He had to change that behavior and now takes care of it every night so he’s not considered late by Amazon. His packages were leaving on time and reaching the customers on time, but they weren’t getting recorded on time.

Some clients got in trouble because they were confirming their orders before they were actually picked up by the carrier. This is a no-no. You will get warned and then worse. Don’t confirm your orders until after they are picked up. Amazon is not fooled, and they are not amused.

Late shipments are just the beginning of course. There are late deliveries – a problem that hurts a lot of my clients who fulfill overseas orders from the U.S. – lost packages, damage in shipping, faulty product, poor packaging, late customer inquiry response and more. These metrics are captured on your summary pages but may not tell the whole story. You should look at the actual data to see if there are patterns and problems you can proactively fix.

If you have a problem that repeats, you need to fix it. It seems obvious, but I’m often surprised at how long my clients sold obviously faulty product, continued to sell even though their chosen carrier wasn’t delivering their products on time, were told there were repackage and used products in their inventory (sold as New) but didn’t inspect them themselves. The list goes on and on. If your customers or Amazon metrics are telling you something, you need to act.

For my clients who have trouble responding to their customers fast enough, for example, I have them download the Amazon Seller App to their phone. It will notify you instantly if there is a customer message, so you can respond immediately. I have my clients commit to responding to their emails at least twice a day during the week and once a day on weekends and holidays.

Lastly, be sure you are tracking your real metrics. Now that you know there are only five “hard hits” a year allowed to your account, it means that every counterfeit claim is important and you can’t let them go unanswered. Because we don’t know what the other “hard hits” are, we tell our clients to assume that
they are all hard hits. If there is a policy violation, it needs to be addressed. Period. You can’t afford to let anything build up.

When you address a policy violation with Amazon, be sure to ask them to put an internal annotation on your account that the ASIN was not counterfeit (or whatever the claim is). This will help if you are ever suspended in the future for that ASIN.

**STEP FIVE: Fix Your Listings**

This has got to be one of the most confusing areas of Amazon policy and violations. On the one hand, we are told that everyone should list under one listing. There shouldn’t be multiples. THEN we are told that if there is the slightest variation whatsoever with the product, it needs a separate listing. This is where things get all fuzzy because there may not really be any variation. All those private label guys who think they are so smart slapping a label on a generic product are creating confusion on the platform for everyone – buyers and sellers.

If you are going to private label, do it right and create a truly different value-add product. (Whoops! Where did that soapbox come from?). Back to listings. I’ve seen sellers who genuinely try to do the right thing and clean up their listings and still get into trouble. Here are a few pointers:

- **Don’t list your generic under a branded listing.** Yes, I know. It’s the same product, but Amazon doesn’t see it that way. If the listing creator is registered, they can kick you off the listing at best or get you suspended at worst. Make a new listing.

- **Don’t sell generic products as private label.** Equally problematic. It causes confusion and can get you shut down. Make a real value-added change to the product that you can defend. Your picture and description should clearly tell buyers what is different about your product from other, similar products.

- **Don’t deliver your product by email.** The guy who emailed a foot reflexology chart to his customers as part of his private label offering was clever, BUT what he did is against Amazon policy. Why? Because not everyone will open and read their email. Many people don’t even give Amazon their real email address. That chart needed to be a part of every single package that was delivered, technically. He was sending out a product with missing parts. When Amazon finds out, they will shut his listing down (at best) with a warning. It is OK to offer the chart as a customer-friendly afterthought, but if it is part of the listing, it needs to be in the box. I send recipes to buyers of one of my holiday bundles. It is a nice-to-have, not part of the product offering.

- **Register your brand.** If you own it, register it. It will save you hassle down the road and allow you to defend your listing. It also blocks other sellers from making changes to your ASIN. They can still sell on it, technically, but they can’t mess with it.

- **Look for copyright infringement.** This applies mostly to listings you create. Did you take the picture off the internet? You could be vulnerable. Is the brand properly listed with ® or ™? You could be vulnerable. Did you lift your product description from the manufacturer’s website? You could be vulnerable. Not all brands vigorously defend their trademarks online, but those that do...watch out!
Make sure you take your own pictures (that meet Amazon’s exacting standards!), write your own descriptions and use the correct symbols.

- **Don’t use condition notes for variations.** I see this often. Your condition notes are exclusively to describe the condition of the packaging or the product, not for variations. New is New. There should be nothing else to say. No marketing copy, no claims of fast shipping. Nothing. New is New. For used products, like a CD, you might say “Used-Good: Scuffed cover with scratches and cracked case. CD is in playable condition with very minor scratches.” This is a physical description of the product but the implication is that it is in no way different from the New product otherwise. You would NOT say “CD is missing liner notes and promotional poster.” Used products must be complete. You would NOT say “This is the 1978 version” when the listing is the latest version unless that is a variation that is noted in the description. You usually only see this with books, and this book isn’t long enough for me to talk about everything that’s messed up in the books category. Suffice it to say that for most items that you sell, your product MUST match the listing EXACTLY without one single difference.

- **Add pictures of alternate packaging.** If you sell a product that has lots of packaging variations like health and beauty, food or other consumable categories, add your picture to the listing rather than try to describe the difference in your condition notes. You may need to enlist Amazon’s help if you did not originally create the listing. Show them the manufacturer’s website, for example, where their new packaging is described, or another retailer’s site where the alternate packaging is displayed. (By the way, this is manufacturer’s packaging, not your re-packaging of a bulk purchase.) You will also want to add a note to the product description to the effect of: “Please note product packaging variations in pictures to the left.”

- **Don’t repackage and list on retail packaging.** If you have bought in bulk and re-packaged, you will need to create a new listing that shows your packaging. You see this with things like candy, baby formula and the like, where the seller has put a pound of loose candy into a polybag or 20 individual formula packets into a polybag. It must be clear to the consumer what to expect when they order the product. Watch out for new re-packaging rules in the grocery category.

- **Make sure your products REALLY match.** Remember the story of my client who was putting helpful subtitle-removal instruction stickers on his DVDs? I also had a client who bought product from the manufacturer, which had decided to reuse a 30-serving bottle for 60 servings (or maybe vice versa). The manufacturer slapped a new sticker over the old one. One of my client’s customers decided to peel off the new sticker and was convinced there was something fishy going on because of this sticker. Another client was selling a loose product without a retail box. While he technically matched the listing (which said nothing about a box one way or the other), customers complained he was selling counterfeit. They expected a retail box instead of a loose product in bubble wrap. Look at your listings and ask yourself if someone could possibly be confused or have an expectation you might not initially anticipate. In the case of the bottle with different serving quantities, my client didn’t pay attention when the bottles came in. That is an easy fix for him from now on. Besides talking to the manufacturer, he is now more diligent when product arrives at his warehouse. For my client with the loose product, he now shrink wraps it before shipping.
• **Be honest in your description.** You’d think this would be obvious, but people are confused by the difference between marketing and telling the truth. OK, that was a trick statement. Marketing is still supposed to be the truth! While there are subjective terms like “delicious,” be very careful with claims like weight loss, lowering cholesterol or making you more virile. All the supplement guys I’ve ever worked with skated pretty close to the line of making claims the product can’t support. If it is a cheap piece of plastic from China, don’t say stuff like “high quality!” You are asking for trouble. If your product is a knockoff or a generic, and you sell it as the real thing, you are asking for instant banishment. This is serious business with Amazon. If you are selling on someone else’s listing and really have no idea if your product is any good or actually matches the description (I see this often with people who source through retail arbitrage), don’t sell it!

• **Comply with regulations.** Many people sell in regulated niches without knowing what they are doing. They may be buying a ton of great stuff at CVS and see other sellers up there and decide to sell as well. This can be a terrible mistake, especially if they miss the notices about new FDA rulings and restricted ingredients. They may add items to the catalog without being aware of what they can and can’t say legally. They usually don’t know when Amazon is wrong, either, and can’t get reinstated on a listing that has been closed unnecessarily. Don’t rely on the wisdom of the crowd in this case because those other sellers could be lemmings.

Supplements, over-the-counter drugs, cosmetics, personal-care products and some foods are the biggest danger areas. If you are going to sell in these categories, educate yourself. Don’t send in inventory until you are confident that the ingredients are not restricted. Read every email you get from Amazon about new FDA findings or newly restricted ingredients. Since many FBA sellers don’t have product on hand with an ingredients list to check, I suggest you add the ingredients to your listings as you join them. Take a high-quality picture of your ingredients and nutrition information (if relevant) and add it as a secondary picture to the listing. It will help your customers, and it will help you if there is ever a question about your product’s ingredients. I give the same advice to MF sellers for a different reason: Ultimately Amazon is going to make you do it anyway, just like they did recently in food. You might as well start complying now.

• **Fix your categories.** Again, this is not worth the effort for only a few units. But if you plan to sell a product regularly, you should not only check for the most correct listing (if there are multiples), but also the right category. If your product is for pets but the ASIN is in Kitchen, then it needs to be fixed. As an added incentive, any effort you make to improve a listing counts positively toward you in the algorithm Amazon uses to decide who gets the Buy Box for that listing and for how long. Now for the stick. If you create a listing and put a product into the wrong category, and it is quite clear what the right category should be, then you will get a warning the first time and suspended the second. Don’t put your candy in menswear or your dog collar in kitchen or your food item in beauty. You will get caught and warned. If you don’t know where to put your backpack or some other ambiguous item, look at the intent of the product. Is it being sold to children going to school or a family that camps together? If you are really stumped, call Seller Support and ask to speak to a category expert. Lastly, the *Everything Else* category is horribly abused. If you have a product that truly does not fit into one of the hundreds of categories and sub-categories on Amazon, you are probably selling something forbidden or illegal. Do not use this category unless you are positive there is no other home for your product.
• **Delete/archive listings.** If you are not actively selling on a listing and don’t plan to again in the near future, you need to get it out of your inventory immediately. You don’t want to get dinged over a product you don’t even sell. I see it happen all the time. Sellers mistakenly think that if they have zero items to sell, they are fine. Not so. You need to officially delete (MF sellers) or close and archive (FBA sellers) that item. In that way, you tell Amazon you are not selling it and not planning to sell it again in the near future. If a rights-holder files an “inauthentic” or copyright infringement on an old listing of yours, you are safe because you closed it down. Otherwise, you’d have to go through all the trouble of dealing with the issue.

• **Read your listings.** This dings a lot of sellers – me included – because we have many ASINs and no time to read them all. If you use third-party software to list your items, you don’t even see Amazon’s description. Instead you see just the title and picture. Later you find out that you either listed against the wrong ASIN or that there are serious problems with your ASIN’s description that need to be fixed before this listing goes live. Unfortunately, most of us find this out after our listings are live. I suggest a multi-stage approach. Start with all your listings, replenishments etc., going forward. From now on, read your listings when you are preparing your inventory. For your older merchandise, either delegate or break it into manageable pieces – 20 a week, something like that. Besides general information, you want to check for:
  o Multipacks
  o ASIN and picture changes
  o False claims

**STEP SIX: Adjust Your Policies**

Some of my clients have dreadful shipping and returns policies. They get in trouble constantly with their customers who want to know where their products are. Or, customers are getting the third degree from them when they want to return a product for a refund. The buyer complains to Amazon, who sides with them.

Sellers with these policies need to shift their mindset. Writing and posting a policy is not good enough. There has to be real change inside the company. If most of your customer complaints are caused by how you approach shipping and returns/refunds, you need to fix it now. Unhappy customers are not allowed in Amazon’s world. Check your current policy against this list and see if there are any areas where you can improve:

**Shipping.** Here are the basic mistakes I see:

• No reliable tracking (hint: USPS is a poor partner) or no tracking at all. (I see that in the UK and overseas.)
• No email to the customer letting them know when their product is due.
• Poor packing/packaging.
• No insurance on your packages.
• Poor reimbursement policy by your carrier.
• Replacement units or missing parts are not sent by express mail.
• Doesn’t take responsibility – points fingers at the carrier.
• Customers forced to go to post office or customs (overseas) to get their packages. What a hassle!
Returns/Refunds. The most common errors:

- Not automated/hard for the customer.
- Not responsive to customer inquiries/requests.
- Arguing with customers, insisting on pictures of the item in question and essentially calling the customer a liar and a cheat.
- Partial refund given instead of full.
- No pre-paid shipping label for returns.
- Doesn’t use pre-written customer-service email templates.
- No real policy or procedure in place besides “no refunds after 30 days.”
- Gets emotionally involved with the outcome.

A question I hope you are asking yourself at this point is, “Why am I in the shipping and customer-service business when I should be selling?” You can make things easier for yourself by turning on the automated returns setting and answering a couple of questions. It gives all your customers, whether they are FBA or MF customers, the ability to use the automated returns system at Amazon. With just a couple of clicks, they can print off their return shipping labels. Your number of inquiries about returns drops significantly.

If you have any ASINs that you want to be exceptions, you can tell Amazon you will handle those yourself.

You can boost your customer-service success by a series of emails. I’ve mentioned Feedback Genius before and will say here that simply letting customers know when a product is due and giving them a one-click solution to return their goods is very powerful. Don’t make them go find their order; give them the direct link! That’s what Feedback Genius does, and it is awesome. I include that link in all my emails to customers, even when I’m asking for feedback. You have to have the automated returns turned on; otherwise, the customer emails you for a return.

If a customer sends a product back, make sure the refund is processed immediately and send him an email letting him know a refund has been applied. If you are using Amazon to process your returns, they’ll do this for you, of course.

If a customer complains about a missing part, a lost product or damaged merchandise, send her a part or replacement unit by express mail and let her know it is coming. Your responsiveness will make her very happy. I have a client who has a number of positive feedback “5” ratings where the customer said, “The CD case was cracked when it came, but the seller sent me a new one by express mail for free!” They’re thrilled.

STEP SEVEN: Consider FBA for Problem ASINs

Most shipping and performance problems can be resolved for a seller overnight by switching to FBA. For clients who are resistant to the idea (I had one guy who didn’t want to have to downsize his warehouse crew), I suggest they at least switch some of their problem ASINs to FBA. A problem ASIN represents a product that is frequently damaged in shipping, routinely late for some reason, or has issues with theft/dishonest buyers.
I have one client right now who has lost dozens of units of a very expensive discontinued salon product because the buyers all claim never to have received the product. He sends, re-sends, re-sends and ultimately refunds. Now they have all these free units of shampoo. The UPS says the products are delivered, so they won’t pay him for the lost product. Amazon sides with the customers, even though they know the buyers are liars. We suspect a team of geographically dispersed friends. The situation made my client very angry, and one vindictive buyer threatened him when he pointed out that the UPS guy remembered putting the package into her hands personally. She said, “You don’t want me to make a claim with Amazon do you?” and basically had him over a barrel. We are going to turn her in once he is reinstated.

I convinced him to switch to FBA. Amazon will deal with the liars and reimburse him if the package is “lost” in shipping. He is out of the customer-service business, and it is good for him. He was becoming cynical and depressed.

Another client had such appalling customer-service instincts that I suggested he switch to FBA. His customers weren’t just complaining. They were get-the-pitchforks-and-torches outraged. No amount of advice from me was going to fix this situation for him – he couldn’t help himself. He was busy and tired and found his customers annoying. He is out of the customer-service business now.

One of my UK clients had committed so many “sins” with shipping that I knew he would never be reinstated if he didn’t switch 100% to FBA and stop shipping product from the U.S. to the UK. He resisted it a lot and it came down to not wanting to figure out Value-Added Tax (VAT). Learning VAT is preferable to not selling at all, however. When someone writes the “1-2-3 Guide to VAT,” I’ll buy a copy for every one of my customers who ships to the UK or other European country from the U.S.

Obviously, FBA isn’t the answer for everyone or every ASIN. If you sell furniture or large auto parts, for example, FBA would be insanely expensive.

**STEP EIGHT: Don’t Sell Product You Don’t Own (Drop Shipping)**

I have met clients who have really excellent drop shipping partners. Great drop shipping arrangements are rare, and they didn’t stop my clients from being suspended for drop shipping. To be clear, Amazon doesn’t forbid drop shipping. When I say suspended for drop shipping, I mean all the potential problems with drop shipping: cancelled orders, late shipments, poor tracking, difficult returns, negative feedback, A-to-Z claims…you get the picture. And so does Amazon. If you are identified as a drop shipper by their robots, they’ll come for you hard and they won’t forgive. Amazon wants you to have the product in hand before you list it on Amazon. They want their customers to get their products fast, not a week or two from now, and they want easy returns.

You are putting your business in someone else’s hands if you drop ship. I’ve seen it done right, but mostly I’ve seen it go horribly, horribly wrong. If you drop ship, look at your metrics and customer complaints – are you already in trouble?

Usually a small portion of your inventory generates the most sales. If you drop ship fast-selling items that aren’t huge, consider buying a few cases and sending them in FBA instead of relying on your drop shipper. (I’m sure you are familiar with the concept of wholesale?) Amazon likes that better.
Recently, Amazon has forbidden retail drop shipping as a practice. This is a banishing offense now. In other words, don’t list items on Amazon and then fulfill them from an online retailer like drugstore.com or Target.com.

**STEP NINE: Prepare for Counterfeit Claims**

Customers claim all kinds of things in order to get free shipping, and some of them trigger the robots. Even if they aren’t saying counterfeit, several “Does Not Match Description” claims back-to-back could have you looking at a counterfeit claim. If your listing is shut down or you are suspended for counterfeit, your best defense is to be prepared with the right invoices. If you look at your current inventory right now and think about where you bought it – are you vulnerable?

**Good Enough**

- Wholesalers
- Manufacturers
- Rights-holders
- Authorized resellers and distributors
- Major retailers if receipts have full product name and UPC code

**Not Good Enough**

- Most online receipts
- Receipts without product name and UPC codes
- Liquidators
- eBay dealers
- Thrift stores, discounters and overstocks unless the UPC code and full name are included on receipt
- Products bought on Amazon and flipped

Seeing what I see every day has changed how I purchase inventory. It is about what you can prove, and you are guilty until proven innocent with Amazon. Since I started this consultancy practice, I now organize my receipts much better. They are all scanned and searchable. (I use ShoeBox.) I’ve stopped retail arbitrage and focus on wholesale. I’m less interested in liquidators or guys who sell large lots of things – even if it is a case of merchandise directly from Amazon – because they don’t have detailed invoices.

**STEP TEN: Improve Your Examination and Testing Processes**

I see a lot of people who bought from liquidators suspended for “Used Sold as New” claims as well as counterfeit. Most liquidators include returns and repackaged goods in their lots that they sell you. If you sell those on Amazon as New, you’re in trouble. It is such a big issue that Amazon has made it THE suspension reason for the past couple of weeks. Lots of sellers are dealing with “Used Sold as New” whether it is relevant to their case or not. For my clients who buy from liquidators, it is super important that they examine every item closely and have some kind of testing process if it is an electronic item. This means that a lot of their liquidation purchase will be sold Used.
Another thing I’ve seen catch sellers by surprise are manufacturers that change the packaging or add or subtract items from their normal packages without telling the buyer. These can be very minor things or big things. If you send in the inventory and it does not match the listing exactly, you are in trouble. You need an in-house process for catching changes before items are sold and shipped. It has to be:

- Easy
- Reliable
- Repeatable
- Effective

Among other things, you want to open a package and inspect the insides closely. You don’t necessarily have to do this every time you send in a replenishment, but certainly every time you have a shipment from a new supplier you should look inside the box as well as outside. You can re-sell that unit Used or discard it. At least you will be confident that there are no missing parts.

One of our clients had a manufacturer that failed to include an instruction book in an entire lot of product. This ended up hurting my client because he hadn’t examined the merchandise very closely before sending it to Amazon. Now he was dinged for “Missing Parts.” Another client sold cell phones and the manufacturers were constantly changing what was in the package (besides the phone) like chargers, cords, etc., with no warning. From now on, he has to open a box from every shipment to check for problems because they change things so often. He has to create new listings, which is a hassle.

If you are accustomed to selling merchandise that is shipped from suppliers directly to Amazon, you might want to make sure you get a unit to examine first. Don’t go live with your listing until you’ve examined it. This will help you spot problems before inflicting them on your customer. If you use Amazon to label/prep your inventory, they will send you a unit to examine. This will give you a chance to examine Amazon’s packaging as well.

An important part of the appeal when you are suspended is the Plan of Action. The purpose of this Plan is to tell Amazon what you will do proactively to avoid the problem happening again. This is different from all the reactive things you are doing (recalling inventory, etc.) once you are suspended.

Because you are not currently suspended, this is your chance to be proactive. Make your Plan now about how to reduce complaints by better examining your inventory before it goes on sale. For people who source inventory through retail arbitrage, they have no one to blame but themselves if the customers are complaining about dinged, dirty and scruffy-looking inventory. Don’t buy crap! Buy pristine products. It is not worth losing your business over one questionable box that you decided to send in instead of put back down. You have the receipt. Return it unless it is perfect, and then make sure you pack it very well so it gets to Amazon in perfect condition. This is your responsibility. These are factors you can control.

Wholesale and online arbitrage sellers are not off the hook for this, either. Make sure there is someone/a team in your process that is examining boxes when they come in. P.S. You can’t count on Amazon. Not all of their warehouse teams are up to snuff. I strongly suggest a middle person between the supplier and Amazon that is examining inventory for you, if you are not examining it for yourself.
STEP ELEVEN: Commit to a Better Customer Experience

It seems obvious, but Amazon is crazy about the customer experience. It expects you to be, too. I’m often surprised at sellers who don’t understand this. I’ve seen my clients argue with customers, call them names, be stingy with refunds and generally make it tough for anyone who dares to have a question or want a refund. To help stay out of Amazon’s crosshairs, you need to look like them, act like them and take care of the customer like them.

The customer is not the enemy – even the liars, thieves and mischief-makers. If your business is not generating enough revenue to handle your returns as a small, manageable portion of your sales, you have a big problem with your financial model or products that you are selling. That is your enemy. Most businesses accept returns as part of doing business and can afford the losses.

If you are unhappy with your refund rate, then YOU need to do something about it. The problem isn’t the customer. The problem is the product and how you are handling it. If, for example, you are making strong claims about your product, your product better back them up. If people are really mad when they are trying to get a return, try to find out why and fix it for them. You are their friend, not the enemy.

Two of my clients had regular complaints with several of their DVD products. Customers didn’t like that the DVDs were subtitled. Why is that? Was it because they didn’t know how to turn off the subtitles? Not really. Most people figured that out. They didn’t like it because they felt tricked. The product wasn’t what they expected. They worried about the quality. We started adding the word “foreign import” to the descriptions. We sent the customer instructions by email when the product arrived that told them how to remove the subtitles. We reassured them that we were buying our product directly from the manufacturer – just in another country.

It helped because my clients addressed the customer problem head-on. They didn’t stand back and say, “Those stupid customers! They can’t even figure out how to turn off their subtitles!” They didn’t say, “If I point the problem out to them, my complaints will go up.” They said, “There must be something I can do to make it easier for my customer.” That is what sets the great sellers apart from the good ones. They take responsibility for every aspect of the sales process – even the customer’s perceptions and reactions. Do they still get complaints about the subtitles? Yes, but a lot fewer than before.

Supplement sellers have a high rate of returns with their products because some people take them and don’t lose weight, don’t get stronger, aren’t smarter, aren’t more virile…you get the picture. They return products for “defective” because they get free shipping and because they are still fat, impotent, weak, dumb…and they hate that. They can’t admit the problem might be their own behaviors or their inability to follow directions. No, it must be that the magic pills don’t work. And yet, the better supplement sellers have higher positive feedbacks, fewer returns than standard and virtually no claims of “defective.” How do they do that? They:

1. Advertise that they offer no-hassle refunds as part of their returns policy.
2. Offer refunds for 60, or sometimes 90, days.
3. Deliver cheerful and immediate refunds.
4. Give automated and FREE returns for the few who will return New, unopened items. (Maybe they ordered the wrong product by accident.)
5. Tell customers there is no need to return the product. (They can’t resell it anyway, most likely.)
6. Ask for positive feedback right after issuing the refund.

I can hear the gasps now. Let me add that these are very profitable, successful, high-volume sellers. I don’t want to get too “Christmas Carol” here, but greatness is rarely built on parsimony. It is built on generosity of spirit and passion. Step back and look at the big picture. Happy customers tend to come back and spend more. Customers who are unsure about buying will take the plunge if they feel safe doing so. Not all of them will return the product.

When you look at your returns report, what do you see? Unhappy customers? Are certain products responsible for a lot of the total returns? To avoid suspension, look at your account the way Amazon does. Think about their crazy commitment to their customers. Are your metrics reflecting your commitment? Take responsibility and take action. Fix those problem ASINs with high returns. Turn your customer’s frowns upside-down.

Think of these as the 10 Amazon Commandments of Customer Service¹ and apply them to your business:

1. Fix The Customer’s Problem – Make Everything Easy
2. Don’t Cancel the Customer’s Orders
3. Make Them Happy and Ask For Positive Feedback
4. Be a Refunder, Not a Fighter
5. Fix A-to-Z Claims Yourself
6. Shut Down Bad Products Fast
7. Improve Your Packaging
8. Find Better Shipping Partners
9. Don’t Sell Poor-Quality Inventory
10. If Customers Complain, It’s Too Late

STEP TWELVE: Get Authorized

For sellers who begin with retail or online arbitrage, this is a foreign concept. We are not authorized resellers of these products. We are not necessarily selling fake product, but we are not authorized. Because of that, there can be problems with our competitors, with manufacturers and sometimes with Amazon with claims of “inauthentic.”

Some industries are more likely to have exclusive seller arrangements than others. You see this in industries and product lines that were traditionally sold through territories or select retail outlets like salons or doctors’ offices or distributors. Do you think your house contractor buys his electrical components from Home Depot? No. That’s for consumers. He buys them through distributors, where he can get the service and exact products that he needs for the job. The selection is ten times what you’ll find in a retail hardware

¹ Made up by me, to be clear. My understanding from the New York Times story is they have 14 principles they live by.
store. Electronics, car parts...the list goes on and on. The sellers of these business-to-business products usually own territories and have exclusive rights for those areas much like a franchise.

What happens when these products are now sold on Amazon? It is confusing and chaotic for the occasional seller, but the insiders know the score. Here are a few things you may not know about brands and territories on the platform:

1. There are two brand registries. One is for smaller sellers, and one is for big sellers that came to Amazon from the traditional background I mentioned above.
2. Getting registered in the first brand registry is what happens to the private label guys and the people who have product exclusives. They have ownership over their listing and their product, but other sellers can list on the listing. You have to defend it and kick off the interlopers. Still, at least you can do that.
3. In the second brand registry, the brand owner can create a secret list of approved sellers for its products such that only these approved sellers can list on that product. No muss, no fuss. The downside from the outside seller’s point of view is that this list is secret. You will get shut down if you try to list on that product, and will not know why or have any recourse.

For my guys in electronics with high-volume sales, it is almost imperative to get approved to sell on certain listings. Someone will try to kick you off with policy violations, or claims of counterfeit, inauthentic, “Not as Described,” or something else. Sellers might even come under attack from the manufacturer that wants to protect its relationships with its brick-and-mortar resellers. Usually a letter from the U.S. distributor or the manufacturer (or sometimes both) is required. If you can get your company’s name put on the manufacturer’s official list of resellers/distributors on their website, all the better.

In case you are wondering, you can get suspended for this issue, absolutely. Just ask Joly Stick. He fought hard to get authorized on several particular listings because his sales were worth more than $1 million a year on just one ASIN.

Getting authorized isn’t required for everyone, of course, but it can pop up in the strangest ways. I have a client who sells high-end beauty products that are normally only available in high-end salons. Great niche, right? Well...there was a tiny hitch. The manufacturer will cut off and disavow forever anyone found violating its contract and selling its products online. When my client was accused of counterfeit, he was strangely reluctant to give his invoices to Amazon.

I was a little slow, but I figured it out after a few minutes. We threw out that Plan of Action and tried a completely different tack because I suddenly understood that it was most likely that the manufacturer who had filed against him was trying to flush out who had violated the sales agreement. My client would never get reinstated that way. The manufacturer would claim the invoices were “inauthentic” and that they did not sell to him. (This was technically true. They sold to his salon.) Selling against his agreement with the manufacturer was a mistake, but I felt badly for my client who paid a terrible price in laid-off employees who were like family to him and nearly $100,000 in funds held hostage by Amazon. He kept calling me on the phone and saying, “They are crying and crying to me! I need to know what is going to happen!” He cared about his employees a lot and paid them for weeks while we waited to hear back from Amazon.
If it makes sense for what you are selling, take the trouble to get authorized. If a competitor is kicking you off a listing, you MUST get authorized. If you are selling product you know is against your contract with another company (that includes all you MLM people who are selling off old inventory online), you are vulnerable to vengeance from the rights-holder.

Another group that might want to think about getting authorized are suppliers of goods to third-party sellers. As I’ve mentioned previously, Amazon is opposed to certain sources of inventory. If you are a distributor, wholesaler or liquidator and not officially authorized by the manufacturer to sell the goods you are selling, it could be a problem down the road. If your invoices are the ones that Amazon is rejecting, you will lose business from Amazon sellers.

One thing you can do to help your customers that are Amazon sellers is to have detailed, itemized invoices with UPC codes and product names. Take the call, also, if Amazon wants to verify your inventory sources.

**STEP THIRTEEN: Stop Counterfeit**

This is for all of you who buy cheap goods from Alibaba and China in general. If you are selling a generic product, you are probably fine as long as it is not infringing on someone else’s intellectual property. If you are selling a licensed product, be very careful. You need to thoroughly check your partners out and make sure Disney isn’t going to breathe down your neck for illegally using its princesses, for example.

Before its IPO in 2014, Alibaba took down 90 million (yes, million) fake product listings. That should tell you something. Do you think those 90 million sellers all went away meekly, or did they create a new name and sign up again? That’s right. There are plenty of bad operators still up there.

There’s a lot of talk about Chinese sites like AliExpress being hotbeds of counterfeit product sales, but an even larger amount of counterfeit goods is sold on eBay. More complaints come from eBay customers about unwittingly buying a counterfeit product than from customers on any other platform in the world. If you do a fair amount of eBay arbitrage for products to sell on Amazon, do your homework or you might be bringing counterfeit goods into your Amazon portfolio unintentionally. If you are ever accused of counterfeit, you will not be able to defend yourself. The eBay seller is not going to help you out. Amazon will reject your receipt.

One way to stay out of trouble is to not sell DVDs or luxury goods, as those are the most frequent offenders. If it seems too good to be true, it probably is. That being said, I’ve seen some pretty crazy counterfeit things that you wouldn’t expect, like baking soda. You are naturally suspicious of cheap watches, but laundry detergent? There is a whole world of legitimate merchandise out there that should sell on Amazon perfectly fine without any problems. How do you protect yourself from counterfeit goods and find the good stuff?

How to detect counterfeit is a book by itself. I’ve written blog posts that only scratched the surface of the topic. There is, however, a protective shortcut. I suggest a “two strikes and you’re out!” policy. If one customer complains about counterfeit or quality, take it seriously. Have the product returned and take a good look at it and make sure this is the product you sent in (there are dishonest buyers as well as sellers). If a second customer complains, shut it all down immediately and start preparing your defense. Close/
suspend your listings and decide what you want to do. If you are confident that your product is legit, then pull your invoices together and get ready to defend them. If you’ve been diligent up front, this should be easy to do. If you are not sure and want to avoid trouble before it gets on Amazon’s radar, remove your inventory and demand a refund from the manufacturer/supplier. (Don’t hold your breath on this – dishonest players don’t refund.) Make sure that counterfeit claim isn’t really about damage in shipping or a related claim.

If Amazon comes to you about counterfeit, you can tell them you already took action when you saw your customers’ concerns and show your steps.

Send emails to your customers asking them why they think it is counterfeit and make sure you get their merchandise back to examine for yourself. Of course you are going to refund their money and pay for the return shipping. Because this issue is so serious, I recommend calling your customer if you can’t reach them by email. (Email first, though.) Be friendly, helpful and curious.

One client had received several complaints about a particular product not being new. He was bewildered by this because he was buying from an authorized distributor. He found out just in time that the manufacturer had disavowed that distributor and severed its business relationship with it for packing up returns and selling them as New. By providing Amazon with the manufacturer’s letter to its reseller community disavowing the distributor, my client was reinstated. This is another example of why buying from legitimate sources is so important. My customer was buying from what was an authorized reseller. He would not have been reinstated if he hadn’t been.

Another client lost her selling privileges completely because she had several counterfeit complaints one right after the other in a short time period. She didn’t respond quickly enough and was banned. We are still working on her case. Be fast. Don’t let a potentially counterfeit product keep selling on the platform.

You should also check out your partners before you buy from them. Some sellers got in trouble for using a category ungating service to get them into DVDs. By turning the whole process over to someone else, they were vulnerable to that person’s/company’s mistakes. And this was a doozy. To get ungated in DVDs requires that you tell Amazon at least two sources you will buy from. One of the sources chosen by this ungating company for its clients was a liquidator. Dozens of sellers had this company listed as a source, and many of them actually ordered from this source.

A few seconds on that liquidator’s website and I knew they were trouble. Not only were they a liquidator, which is NOT an authorized reseller, but they also clearly took no steps to make sure their product was legitimate. They were based in China. They didn’t disclose their sources. In Amazon’s world, buying from these guys was as bad as buying it off a blanket in Times Square or a street box in Chinatown. So why did Amazon approve all those sellers in DVDs? It was a different Amazon department. The Amazon gated category approvers are different from the Amazon policy violation group. Eventually the policy violation guys caught up and they punished the ungating company, as well as the sellers who used them.

Whose fault was this? That’s right. It was the sellers’ fault. The ungating company bears some measure of blame, too, but it is your account at risk here. You are responsible. While it is OK to get help with your business, you need to look at the application and approve it. You need to be the one who posts it to Seller
Central. If you don’t know enough about Amazon’s requirements to judge the quality of your vendor’s submission, you need to learn. There is really no shortcut to getting into an ungated category. Even if you hire a service, you still need to know how the category works or you’ll get suspended for violating a category rule down the road. The whole idea of the ungating process is to teach sellers how to be successful in the category.

If this story isn’t sufficiently chilling yet, I will tell you that sellers who bought from that Chinese company were banned for life. Their invoices were not approved. They were out. I got two sellers reinstated by throwing themselves on Amazon’s mercy and begging for another chance. They promised to never sell in DVDs again. They removed or destroyed their DVD inventory. We sent the letter directly to Jeff Bezos’ people. Amazon waited more than two months to reinstate them. They were punished and put on probation, but they were forgiven. Other sellers weren’t so lucky.

**STEP FOURTEEN: Practice Safe Selling**

It amuses me to think of commingling as an Amazon social disease – particularly since the solution is to wear a prophylactic aid (aka an FNSKU label). It is not funny in practice, however. Sellers are highly vulnerable to the integrity of other sellers when they commingle.

Anyone who sells New FBA items is technically a commingler. Amazon may take a product from another seller, send it to your customer, and then use your product to resupply that other seller’s stash. The reason they do this, of course, is to get product quickly to the customer. If you don’t have any inventory in a California warehouse, but your fellow seller does, they’ll take his and then ship yours to that warehouse to replenish it. They might even send several units to that warehouse if they think there will be a lot of demand in California. Somewhere in the black box that is Amazon, they keep track of these things. Most of the time it works pretty well.

The official commingler is the seller that sends in her inventory “stickerless commingled.” This means she doesn’t have labels on her product. The units go into a big pool of available units, which are used interchangeably to meet customer demand. In theory this is a great idea for the seller, for Amazon, and for the customer. In practice, it leads to danger and tears.

It goes wrong when your fellow sellers are careless (at best) or unethical. They bring counterfeit or scruffy inventory into the pool of products. They are the proverbial bad apples. Your customer received this horror and complains against you. You have to prove to Amazon that your inventory is good, and it wasn’t you. The unhappy customer is still yours even if Amazon agrees with you that your product was bought from a reputable source. (Your product was bought from a reputable source, right?) Now you are paying the price for someone else’s treachery.

Why doesn’t this happen to the guys who sell regular FBA if they are unofficially comminglers? Because they have an FNSKU sticker on the back of their products. Amazon knows they are not the bad apple. Their customer may be upset, but it is possible to prove to Amazon that it wasn’t their inventory. All they have to do is look at their black box. Amazon will support them and even reimburse them if it was Amazon’s fault for shipping someone else’s inventory to the customer. It is the least Amazon can do.
The solution for the stickerless commingled sellers is to have Amazon sticker their products— or to do it themselves. It currently costs 20 cents a unit for Amazon to put a label on your product. Think of it as insurance. If 20 cents per unit eats into your profits too much, you have another problem to deal with— your margins. Your inventory will still be sold commingled, but you are protected if the faulty product isn’t yours. It also makes it a lot easier for Amazon to track down the bad actor by process of elimination.

Remember when Amazon shut down all Disney Frozen® products and required sellers to get approved to sell Frozen goods? That was because the counterfeit problem was so bad and they had so many stickerless comminglers that they couldn’t track the bad apples. Everyone’s inventory had to be examined. Everyone had to be re-approved. Many sellers weren’t. Amazon lost a lot of money because of this. They had to throw out the bad inventory and still make their sellers whole. Their customers were unhappy because Amazon alone could not keep up with the demand and frequently sold out of popular goods. This was a case where Amazon’s stickerless commingling idea came crashing down around them.

And yet my clients still often resist the idea of labeling their products. We usually compromise by having them label the problem ASINs to start. It is a stop-gap measure. They are still practicing highly risky selling. Unless you are the ONLY provider of a product on Amazon, you are risking everything you have when you stickerless commingle.

Some may be thinking, “I have great invoices, so I don’t need to worry.” OK, maybe you don’t need to worry about being reinstated, but you do have to worry about being suspended. The robots do that. Right now it is taking more than three weeks for some of our customers to get reinstated after they turn in their Plans. Considering our backlog, it can easily take five business days to get a Plan written. That’s three weeks you are not selling. What is that worth to you? Is it worth 20 cents a unit? Some of our clients come to us with only days left before their 17-day Plan of Action deadline with Amazon. We charge them more to expedite their Plans (we have to work all night), so that’s thousands of dollars in our fees, plus their losses, plus Amazon is still likely to hold on to part or all of their money for a week to a month once they are reinstated while Amazon conducts an in-depth review of the sellers’ business. OK. End of lecture.

STEP FIFTEEN: Manage Your Partners

I’ve said it throughout this book, but you are responsible for your business. It is OK to use outside services and to have partners in your business that help you manage inventory, reprice your goods, prepare inventory for fulfillment, get you into ungated categories, etc. What you can’t do is take your eye off the situation because you are still ultimately responsible for the end result. Just like you still need to learn about Amazon’s category requirements, you also need to make sure your partners are reputable and doing their jobs.

I’ve had clients explain to me how a technology snafu messed up their orders or tracking or caused them to cancel an order. I get it, but my question back is always, “How are you going to make sure it never happens again?” This usually is more difficult because my clients are not used to looking at their business that way. They are used to dealing with the problem then moving on to the next issue.

Amazon sees that as reactive and not proactive. They are a continuous improvement organization. This is how the proactive approach looks in practice. My client had a problem because he accidentally uploaded
the previous day’s shipments again to Amazon. It created a big mess. I said, “OK, we can explain that to Amazon. Now, how are you going to make sure that doesn’t happen again?” Silence. It was human error, and he didn’t know how to prevent that from happening again. Everyone makes mistakes.

I pushed back, examining every step of how the problem had occurred. I learned that he gets the spreadsheets from his shipping partner by email every day. He had accidentally chosen the wrong email and hastily uploaded it. He would be more careful in the future. “Not good enough for Amazon!” I said. More silence.

“How about if you add two new steps to your process?” Now after he uploads the spreadsheet every night, he saves the file to his hard drive, and he deletes the email from his shipping partner. That’s it. Assuming he follows his procedure, he can never choose the wrong email again because it won’t be there. I suggested he stick a note to his computer screen until the procedure became routine. In addition, he needed to make sure that any new person he trained followed the same procedure. Maybe a short checklist taped to the side of the screen would be helpful.

That is the difference between a reactive plan and a proactive plan. A reactive plan fixes the current mess. A proactive plan avoids a future mess. When you make mistakes in your business or problems come up, you need to take time after the mess is fixed to figure out how to avoid it happening in the future. Most businesses do this for really painful problems (i.e. cost money, took an emotional toll). You need to do it for ANY problem that affects your operations with Amazon.

Your solution does not have to be elaborate, expensive or time-consuming. It just needs to be effective and thought through. My client was reinstated. We detailed his new procedure, and Amazon liked it. He showed he can think like them.

Another client had a big issue with a third-party software vendor that messed up inventory numbers among platforms (he sold on eBay and other platforms besides Amazon), so he ended up with a lot of cancelled orders. He was perfectly happy to blame his software vendor, but had done nothing to make sure the problem didn’t happen again. He thought that was out of his area of influence. He was wrong. He needed to address future problems right away. This was serious! He needed to sit down with his supplier and push them until he was confident the problem would not happen again – whatever it took. He was paying them a lot of money. This was unacceptable and a breach of contract. It had cost him money and time, and now he was suspended. How were they going to reimburse him for that?

I lit a fire under him, and he lit a fire under his software vendor, so that he could come back to Amazon with a clear Plan of Action that showed he had taken the initiative with his vendor to make sure the problem never happened again. I also learned that he was not 100% confident in how to use the vendor’s software. It is possible part of the problem was from him or his team not using the tool properly. What was he going to do about that? They are all getting additional training now. I made it clear to him that someone at his business needed to master this program (so they could teach the others), and he also needed to know it very well – well enough to spot problems before they occurred.

Amazon understands tech problems, but they need to see solutions. I’ve had other clients who switched vendors when one of their partners failed them because they didn’t have confidence the problem
wouldn’t happen again. They would have never known that if they hadn’t pressed the vendor for answers and questioned their processes. I’m not saying you have to turn into Total Quality Management (TQM) fanatics, but you need to understand that your partner Amazon is a TQM fanatic.

These are the key principles of TQM⁴:

**Management Commitment**
- Plan (drive, direct)
- Do (deploy, support, participate)
- Check (review)
- Act (recognize, communicate, revise)

**Employee Empowerment**
- Training
- Suggestion scheme
- Measurement and recognition
- Excellence teams

**Fact-Based Decision-Making**
- SPC (Statistical Process Control)
- DOE (Design of Experiments), FMEA (Failure Modes Effect Analysis)
- The 7 statistical tools
- TOPS (Team-Oriented Problem Solving)

**Continuous Improvement**
- Systematic measurement and focus on CONQ (Continuous Quality)
- Excellence teams
- Cross-functional process management
- Attain, maintain, improve standards

**Customer Focus**
- Supplier partnership
- Service relationship with internal customers
- Never compromise quality
- **Customer-driven standards**

I include this list not to explain it – there are entire books dedicated to TQM – but to show you what you are up against when you have Amazon as a partner. They do know what this all means and they live it. In the recent *New York Times* story, you can see how Amazon has pushed some of these principles to the extreme. “Excellence teams” sounds awesome until you realize it means forced firings annually to clear out the so-called deadwood. Amazon has taken measurement to a level never even imaginable by the original TQM authors. Time will tell if it is a good thing.

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Of these principles, the last one – customer-driven standards – describes Amazon perfectly. When you ever wonder what to do or how to behave, ask yourself, “What is in the best interest of the customer?” That’s what Amazon does. TQM is usually associated with large organizations like Amazon or Ford, and no one expects a small seller with a dozen employees (or just one employee) to operate the same way as the big guys. You can expect more, however: more from your partners, more from your suppliers and more from yourself.

When there is a problem, be sure to reflect later on how to prevent it from happening again. Think through all the steps in a non-judgmental, fact-finding way. See if any of those steps can be modified or adjusted. Remember the end goal is customer satisfaction.

Sometimes the problem arises from something that is so inherent in the person running the business that it can’t be changed or fixed easily – if at all. I’ve had clients that I insisted needed to switch to FBA because I knew it would be next to impossible for them to make the changes needed to meet Amazon’s exacting standards. The solution was to turn it over to a trustworthy partner: Amazon. And by the way, this was by no means an “easy button” solution. These clients’ ability to learn and manage FBA was going to be challenging too. However, I recognized that their chances of success were better in the long-run with FBA.

When we write our clients’ Plans, we follow TQM principles. We speak to Amazon in language it understands. We show our clients taking TQM steps to improve. We focus on the experience of Amazon’s customers. We have our clients make real process changes in their businesses. This is why, when asked, I say we are not letter-writers, and why I don’t review or edit letters written by people who have not gone through my process. I’m not interested in writing a great letter that tricks Amazon into reinstating my clients. I’m interested in making sure my clients never need me again.

You can do the same thing for yourself without having to learn a lot of jargon or read Harvard Business Review. Reflect on past mistakes and problems. Think about what happened and what you might do differently – real, actionable steps – to change it. Remember that the best way to not make a mistake is to eliminate the possibility of a mistake. The client who deleted his daily email after he was done with it could never make that particular mistake again.

Did you send the wrong product to a customer? Everyone has at some point. How do you stop that from happening again? If you are a small operation, then make sure your solution is realistic within the parameters of your resources and personality. Don’t create a plan or process that you know you won’t follow because you hate checklists or whatever. The nice thing about small operations is that you can arrange your universe to suit yourself.

If you are good at one part of your company operations but not another, think about how you can delegate operations in which you are weak and focus on those where you are strong. I’m not saying to improve your weakness areas – that’s not really realistic – but to focus on your areas of strength. Figure out what you are really good at. Find a way to delegate the rest through partners, employees or whatever it takes. Someone or some other entity will be much better in areas where you are weak. Let it go. Your company will be better. You will be happier.
Reinstatement Notes:

- There is a lot that you can do before you are suspended to prevent it.
- The first thing you need to fix is your mindset. You are responsible…and you are empowered.
- Read your imperfect orders, negative feedback, returns reports and customer messages regularly. Then act on them.
- Check your inventory against the listing on Amazon. Read it. Look at the picture. Make sure your product matches exactly.
- Fix your listings to avoid customer confusion.
- Get authorized, if necessary.
- Examine your inventory before it gets to Amazon. Somewhere in your process there needs to be a person examining your inventory against a checklist of possible problems.
- Commit to a better customer experience and take action if your policies and procedures need work. Create templates. Make it easy for the customer to get a return/refund.
- Prevent counterfeit in your inventory and make sure your invoices are ready for examination if Amazon wants to see them.
- Don’t sell product you don’t own. If it isn’t in your warehouse or Amazon’s warehouse, you don’t own it.
- You are vulnerable to counterfeit claims if you buy from liquidators and poor performance metrics if you buy from drop shippers.
- Sticker your inventory.
- Don’t put your business success in anyone else’s hands. You are the boss.
- Delegate in areas where you are weak, focus on areas where you are strong.
Glossary

**Amazonians** – People who work for Amazon. They call themselves that.

**ASIN** – Amazon Standard Identification Number. Amazon assigns a unique ASIN to every product and product variation in its catalog. It is unique to a page on Amazon versus a particular product on Amazon. Pronounced “A-SIN,” an ASIN is how Amazon usually identifies problems to you in performance notifications. This ties the problem directly to your listing on that particular Amazon page. This is particularly important if you sell many versions/colors/variations of a product.

**Banned** – This is where you have exhausted your appeals and Amazon tells you not to write them back any more. Your letter tells you that your funds will be released in 90 days and that to open a new account would be a violation of Amazon policy. From Amazon’s perspective, you are gone and they are done with you. Getting their attention at this point is difficult and can take a long time.

**Buy Box** – This is the price a customer sees on Amazon.com when they got to a product’s main page. Generally there are several offers that rotate through the Buy Box – all within a few percentage points of each other. While FBA sellers get priority over MF, the negative feedback rate can also affect how much time (if any) your offer gets in the Buy Box. Since more than 70% of sales on Amazon are made from the Buy Box, it is important to give yourself every advantage to maximize your time there.

**Case Log** – Part of Seller Central, the case log is for routine correspondence between you and Amazon. This is where cases are resolved like, “Am I approved in grocery?” or where you find the results of negative feedback removal requests. Serious correspondence requiring your attention will be found under “performance notifications.”

**The Checklist** – I’m not sure if there really is a suspension checklist but it seems likely that there is one based on observation. If your plan doesn’t hit on all the topics about you in Amazon’s files, they won’t reinstate you. We’ve been lucky a few times to have an Amazonian pull up the problems in our clients’ accounts for us and let us know what we had to address to get them reinstated.

**Commingled Inventory** – A couple of years ago, I called commingling an Amazon social disease. I had no idea how right I was. Whether or not you choose commingling, your New FBA inventory can be commingled when Amazon is in a hurry to ship something out. The problem arises when another seller has mixed faulty, shoddy, ugly (dinged-up) product in with your pristine units. Sellers who use commingling benefit from fewer expenses (no need for FNSKU labels, for example) and can ship directly to Amazon’s warehouse from their suppliers. Because their units are not labeled, however, they are on the hook for other sellers’ mistakes. That customer complaint about your product? They may not have even gotten your unit – but you can’t prove it. My clients strongly resist it due to added expense, but I encourage all sellers to have their items FNSKU-labeled even when deliberately commingling. It protects them from future problems if they can take a picture of the barcode and say to Amazon, “That’s not my FNSKU on the package.” Think of an FNSKU label as your inventory condom.
Denied – If your original appeal is denied, you usually can still submit a revised Plan of Action. While they won’t review it as quickly as they reviewed your original appeal, there is still a good chance you can be reinstated.

Drop shipping – This practice, while not disallowed by Amazon, is strongly discouraged. One of the clearest ways they discourage this practice is by suspending sellers who show certain characteristics common to drop shippers: late shipments, incorrect orders, seller-cancelled orders, faulty products and more. I can often tell if a seller is drop shipping just by looking at the problems in his/her account. Drop shipping from another online retailer is forbidden. Your receipts will be useless if they show you were drop shipping product to Amazon’s customers from an online retailer.

FBA – Fulfillment by Amazon. This is Amazon’s program through which sellers send inventory to Amazon for fulfillment. The key feature of this program as it relates to getting suspended is that Amazon generally takes responsibility for all fulfillment issues and doesn’t hold them against the seller. My FBA clients are rarely suspended for performance issues. Instead, they are suspended mostly for policy violations. I have some clients who sell both MF and FBA. They are still vulnerable to performance metric suspensions for their MF sales.

FNSKU – Amazon’s Fulfillment Network SKU identifier. This is your unique product identifier to Amazon. It tells Amazon’s warehouse workers everything about that item – your name, SKU, how many units there are; the condition; the day it arrived…everything. With FBA inventory, this number and barcode is placed over the UPC barcode of the product. Merchants don’t need to have an FNSKU because they fulfill their own inventory.

Liquidators – Amazon frowns on this source of inventory. Generally, liquidators buy goods by the truckload from retailers and other commercial enterprises and re-sell them “as is.” The opportunity for a seller is to buy potentially quality merchandise for a low price. The problem is that there are often returns and faulty products mixed in with the good. There can be counterfeit goods, expired items and much more. Amazon can’t stop you from buying from liquidators, but when they suspend you, they won’t accept invoices/receipts from liquidators as legitimate. This is a huge problem if you are suspended for “counterfeit.” Bought from some dealer on eBay or Craigslist? You are in a pickle. Experienced sellers of liquidation merchandise have teams of inventory checkers that weed out the repackages and returns from the New and who test all the electronics products (which have to be sold as “Like-New” instead of “New”). Even so, these sellers are highly vulnerable to claims of counterfeit. Buying from liquidators is risky behavior for most sellers from a suspension perspective.

MAP – Minimum Advertised Price. This usually refers to an agreed-upon price below which an authorized reseller will not sell a manufacturer’s product. It is not considered price-fixing by the industry or Amazon. If you have an agreement with a manufacturer and “break MAP,” they will not sell to you again (generally), unless you are Amazon, apparently. Amazon breaks MAP all the time and still has plenty of product to sell. The manufacturer might also tell Amazon that you are no longer authorized to sell their product. This is a hotly contested issue because, as I mentioned, Amazon breaks MAP all the time. If you can’t lower your price to compete with them, what is the point of selling that product?
Merchant Fulfilled – This is where the seller fulfills his/her own orders. Sellers will often choose to fulfill their own orders because they can do it less expensively than sending it to Amazon...or that is their perception. They may also be selling items that are so large that Amazon’s FBA fees would be impractical. Some merchants are selling inventory they don’t actually own (drop shipping), so they have to quickly purchase and arrange to deliver merchandise once they sell an item.

Messages – This is where Amazon keeps correspondence between you and your customers. If you sell FBA, Amazon will handle a lot of customer service, returns, etc., for you. However, be aware that if the customer reaches out to you for any reason, you are responsible for handling the correspondence. Even if the answer is to send them back to Amazon, you must respond in less than 24 hours. This includes weekends and holidays.

Minions – Also known as worker bees, employees, workers. I use the term to specifically describe a task-oriented person who is working from a template/checklist rather than problem-solving or analyzing.

ODR – Order Defect Rate. Amazon sets the desirable ODR rate at 1% or less. This is a performance metric that includes negative feedback, A-to-Z claims, returns and imperfect orders. The rate by itself is not the whole story, however. You can have an ODR of less than 1% and still be suspended if any single ASIN is making up too much of that rate.

Performance Notification – Amazon notifies you of problems in your account through performance notifications. You will find these in Seller Central under “Performance” at the top of the page.

You should also get an email every time Amazon posts a new performance notification. If you use the Amazon Seller App on your phone, you can arrange your settings to get a notification on your phone every time you have a performance notice (works for customer messages as well). This is where Amazon puts suspension notices (not the case log) and where you file your appeal.

Performance Metric Violation – Amazon holds a high standard of performance for itself and its sellers. When you fall below its required metrics, you will usually receive a warning and then be suspended. Some performance issues like negative feedback rate can be fixed pretty quickly. Others are measured over time and take weeks to months to improve.
**Plan of Action** – Every time a seller loses the right to sell on an ASIN or has his account suspended, Amazon requests a Plan of Action detailing how the seller is going to fix the problem so it doesn’t happen again. Simply saying “I won’t do it again” is not enough.

**Policy Violation** – Amazon has an ever-growing list of what constitutes policy violations. Selling counterfeit products, copyright infringement and selling forbidden products are just a few examples of Amazon’s rules. A complete list can be found on Seller Central “Help.”

**Searchbot** – The word I use to describe the automated keyword-search, algorithm-based process that gets sellers suspended. I also use “Robot.”

**Seller Central** – All Amazon sellers conduct business on the Amazon platform through “Seller Central.” You find it by logging in at: [http://sellercentral.amazon.com](http://sellercentral.amazon.com) for the US platform (or “.co.uk” for the UK or “.de” for Germany, or “.ca” for Canada – you get the idea). This is the repository for all communications and information about selling on Amazon. If you have a question, it is most likely addressed in a report or through Seller Central “Help.”

**Suspended** – Amazon has shut down all your listings and is holding on to your money. You are given 17 days to appeal their decision. They want to see a Plan of Action before they consider reinstating you. If you are suspended, many activities on your account are shut down, including access to Seller Support, automated negative feedback removal and more.

**SKU** – Stock Keeping Unit. This is the unique identifier for a product, usually but not always represented as a number and barcode. Often the manufacturer’s SKU for an item is the UPC or ISBN#. The seller’s SKU for the same item is called an MSKU (“merchant stock keeping unit”). Amazon’s unique identifier for inventory fulfilled by Amazon is called the FNSKU.
About Cynthia Stine and Online Sales Step by Step LLC

In addition to selling on Amazon.com for the past five years, Cynthia has also written the top-selling book *Make Thousands on Amazon in 10 Hours a Week!: How I turned $200 into $40,000 Gross Sales My First Year in Part-time Online Sales*. Her first book helped thousands of third-party sellers get started on Amazon with tight resources using the FBA program and retail arbitrage. She writes a popular blog at [http://onlinesalesstepbystep.com](http://onlinesalesstepbystep.com) and consults with Amazon sellers on their business issues. In 2014, her clients started turning to her to help them get reinstated from being suspended or banned.

Based on her success and experience getting people back to selling, she launched her official Reinstatement services in February 2015. She was flooded with business. The need is great, and the stakes are incredibly high. Many sellers fail when they write the appeal themselves, which can lead to them being permanently banned from selling. Cynthia has developed a system for analyzing sellers’ mistakes, appealing to Amazon and – in most cases – getting her clients’ businesses back up and running. It is one of the toughest and most rewarding things she’s ever done.

Prior to becoming an Amazon seller, Cynthia had 25+ years business consulting and crisis management experience, which gives her a different perspective towards reinstatement. Her goal is to not only get her clients selling again, but to help them figure out how they got in trouble in the first place. She teaches them how to set up systems and put processes in place to make sure it never happens again.

When necessary, she helps sellers make changes to how they do business so they can get out of trouble and stay out of trouble with Amazon.

Online Sales Step by Step LLC today consists of a team of consultants in the United States and trained Amazon administrative assistants in the Philippines. While the business grew rapidly because of our reinstatement work, our mission is Suspension Prevention. We offer “Suspension Prevention” assessments and “Get Clean Stay Clean” services to act as an early warning sign to our clients. Our reinstatement and suspension prevention assessments give our clients insight into what is happening in their account right now that might make them vulnerable to suspension. Finally, we offer a wide range of custom business consulting to help our clients be better sellers.