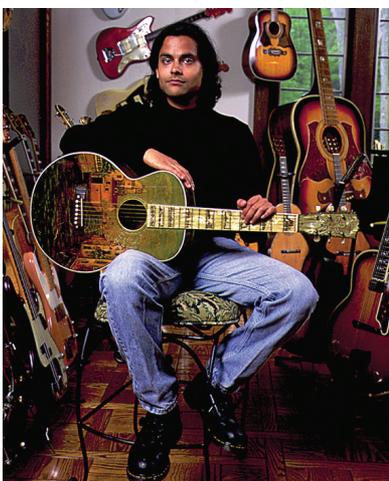


THE CUSTOMER CONNECTION | BY RAVI

Nurturing Newcomers

Art programs disappearing from public schools has become part of American life. Creating well-rounded Americans, intellectually speaking (we have plenty of *physically* well-rounded Americans, despite thriving sports programs), stands in the shadows of achieving high scores on standardized tests, which hardly prepares one for real life.

Surely one cannot place the burden of filling this void on local music stores. However, “mom and pop” do directly impact the future of school music programs. For remaining programs to survive and inspire the resurrection of others, participating students have to excel.



Music retailers can impact the future of school music programs simply by how they serve first-time instrument renters

Students, parents and retailers should consider any rental as a rent-to-own opportunity, so the quality of rentals should be that of a purchasable instrument. After all, we’re trying to engage open minds for a lifetime.

MAKE IT SIMPLE TO SWITCH

Along with quality instruments, flexible rental agreements are vital to a child’s artistic development. Kids should be able to upgrade or switch instruments mid-semester easily in order to find their musical voices. For

most beginners, a horn is a horn and a violin is full, three-quarter or half-size. While this may be the only criteria concerning first-timers, their needs will quickly mature as their talents develop. No restrictive contract should stunt their growth.

INTRODUCE TEACHERS

Good band or orchestra experiences often lead to further private study. Creating incentives for parents to augment school music programs, such as discounted rental rates for those who also enroll in private lessons, is a win-win situation. When junior and his parent come in to rent an instrument, why not briefly introduce him to an available, personable teacher who might inspire him to further his studies? Nothing will endear a potential student to a store like a personal introduction to a professional musician who could possibly be his guiding light.

It is our responsibility as citizens to work conscientiously today to create the best tomorrow. Our children’s intellect is a critical component. We can preach all we want, but at the end of the day, simply not getting in our own way will create a natural interest in and demand for the arts. **MI**

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STREAMLINE RENTALS

Retailers must not create obstacles in the instrument-rental process, as flustered parents may throw in the towel before junior even enters the ring. Facilitating the entire experience will make long-term customers out of newly inducted school music families.

Why not provide educators with preprinted questionnaires for each student, regarding required instruments, accessories, books, etc.? Make them multiple-choice to ensure that they comply with product availability. Perhaps create a form on your store’s Web site or social network. Either one would streamline the process. Excited students would arrive at your store with information in hand or ready to collect merchandise they’ve ordered electronically.

NO POOR-QUALITY INSTRUMENTS

Only well-maintained instruments should be rented along with the appropriate accouterments — no trumpets going out with extra reeds! Otherwise, we’re cutting off junior at the knees, along with chipping away at the future of school music programs and your future customer base.