

VALLEY KEYBOARDS, THE PIANO GALLERY | BY ANDREW LEDET

RMM CONVERSION

Whether it's the FedEx delivery person or a parent picking up a child at one of their stores, Matt and Debra Perez deliver the same message every time. "You can play, we guarantee it," said the owners of Valley Keyboards and The Piano Gallery, based in McAllen and Corpus Christi, Texas, respectively.

"This is part of our mission, this is who we are as teachers," Matt said. "We believe music is for everyone, and anybody can play."

PARADIGM SHIFT

Debra amended their program five years ago after drop-out rates began escalating. The company's group lessons, she said, started out too serious and too fast-paced, and students couldn't keep up.

Debra reconsidered what was best for students and modified her approach to be more focused on recreational music making (RMM) activities. She shifted the emphasis from performance to having an enjoyable musical experience. The company even infused a sense of humor into the group lessons and began stressing the wellness benefits of making music.

The Perez's RMM program now consists of 20 classes between their two stores, with students ranging in age from 4 to 94. They draw more than 600 piano and organ students a week, and they said music education accounts for approximately 40 percent of their revenue.

"We enjoy every little suc-



Debra Perez (left) teaches an Introduction to Music class

Matt and Debra Perez reinvigorated their lesson program with a recreational music focus

cess along the way," Debra said. "The goal is not just the final product of someone being able to perform a piece." Each session concludes with a piano party instead of a recital.

CONNECTING SALES, LESSONS

The Perez's promote their lesson programs with traditional print advertising mediums, like local newspaper ads and signage. They speak at chamber of commerce meetings, home expo shows and shopping malls. Demonstrations, they said, provide a great opportunity to engage those with excuses and misconceptions about music making.

For the Texas duo there's another financial benefit to teaching anyone how to play, beyond lesson revenue.

"As long as we can show them that they can play, they are going to want an instrument," Debra said. "That purchase is a natural extension of our lesson program."

"We've already become their friends," Matt added. "They trust us."

After traveling around the country advising other teachers on how to start their own RMM sessions as part of a program sponsored by the National Piano Foundation, Debra sometimes noticed a disconnect between the sales team and educational staff at music product retailers. She realized not all stores operated like hers.

"Someone could have a really strong education program in the back of their store somewhere or down in the basement or on the second floor and never have this connection with the sales team," Debra said.

The Perez's, on the other hand, stress making sure every-

body is "talking the same message." The company's sales team has to know what products teachers are recommending, and in turn, the sales team alerts teachers of any special values on organs and pianos. And anyone who walks into their stores is a trade-up prospect.

"Once the sales team understands that, then they are always demonstrating something to parents or grandparents coming in," Matt said. "The salespeople could be ignoring the parents who come in to pick up their kids from their lesson, or they could be getting a demo on the latest digital piano or Disklavier product."

Their structured approach is to help students find the right instrument and create a showcase or special sales event where students can come in and save an extra 10-15 percent. "First, we create the desire, the consumer, and later we create the demand through a sales promotion," Matt said.

In the near future, Debra and Matt plan to add 2,000 square feet of additional classroom space to their Valley Keyboards store and continue focusing on retaining students. Along with enrollment goals, they teach after-school sessions at local schools without music programs. Debra is also publishing both a RMM curriculum and a course guide for dealerships starting an RMM program.

"People don't buy our products or services," Matt said. "They buy how they imagine using them will make them feel." **MI**