



Scott Zender (left) and Jeff Nelson

RETAIL IMPROVEMENT LONE STAR PERCUSSION

# LONE STAR'S OVERHAUL

In 2006, former band instructor Scott Zender and engineer Jeff Nelson were in the market to purchase Lone Star Percussion, a 30-year-old Dallas music retailer known for its mail-order catalog. But the store itself — a cluttered warehouse inaccessible to the public and a tiny, linoleum-

tiled storefront with few product displays — was anything but customer-friendly.

Nelson and Zender, now co-owners of the company, were faced with turning a company that conducted 99 percent of its sales by mail-order into a full-service, walk-in drum shop.

## NEW REPUTATION

When two Dallas Symphony Orchestra members paid a visit last month to the revamped store, one admitted to Zender that he hadn't set foot in the shop for 25 years.

"[The old building] was never meant for walk-in retail," Zender said. "All they

had were three or four glass cases with a few products in them but nothing that anybody could touch."

But in the company's decline, the partners saw a rare opportunity. "We took over a company that was, in our opinion, not servicing percussion like it had in previous years," Zender said.



“There were very few actual percussionists working at the store, [and] the accounting system was pretty antiquated.”

The partners’ first actions were hiring a staff of musicians and overhauling the company’s old Web site. They used NetSuite software to link together their revamped Web site and accounting system.

“That means when we change a price, that change is registered right to the Web and shows up immediately,” Zender said. “Before, we had to change a price in two spots. We’ve cut the time spent pricing and changing pictures in half.”

To overhaul the physical store, they knocked out old walls, replaced linoleum floors with carpeting, and installed track lighting and cymbal displays. “There’s so much more product now,” Zender said.

#### GRASS-ROOTS CAMPAIGN

Zender and Nelson rely on well-established connections and subtle strategies to get Lone Star’s name out. Zender appealed to his network of fellow band-leaders by structuring packages and programs for beginning percussionists.

“We go to a lot of drumline contests and summer camps,” he said. “We’ll take a catalog and a few products just so we have a presence, and [the kids] see that name.”

Zender and Nelson also created T-shirts with the company’s logo, which they include free with beginners’ purchases and with most large, out-of-state orders — their way of reaching out to other areas of the country.

According to Zender, the company also recently began hosting drum clinics in its warehouse. This, he said, has helped bring in a new crowd that had never come into the store.

While mail and online orders remain a strong percentage of the company’s business, walk-in retail is growing steadily.

“We’ve gone from selling 10 kits a year to selling 100,” Zender said. “That’s not a lot, but it’s huge for us. We’re moving in the direction we want.”

Recently, the two Dallas Symphony members returned to Lone Star for a nighttime cymbal event. “One told me that this was twice [he’d] been in the store in one week,” Zender said. “That’s a kind of record, you know?” **MI**

— Mary Wilcop, photo by Julie Birdseye

#### RETAIL IMPROVEMENT STANTON'S SHEET MUSIC

# PRINT RETAIL 2.0

In the face of industry outsiders swooping in to conquer the online print music market, Eric Strouse of Stanton’s Sheet Music came out swinging.

“When we started in the 1960s, we were mainly a bulk mail-order company, and we’ve actually stepped that aspect up,” said Strouse, Stanton’s president. “You know what they say: When business is down, promote, promote, promote.”

Strouse inherited the Columbus, Ohio-based dealership from his father in May 2005, just as new, independent print music dealers began sprouting up online to compete with industry giants like Amazon.com.

“We kept the ship going in the same direction, but the industry’s changing,” Strouse said. “The economy’s changing, so the way we look at generating business is, too.”

#### PROMOTIONAL BLITZ

For Strouse, that has meant expanding business, despite signs of an abating economy. When music retail chain Music & Arts began growing in Central Ohio in 2005, putting pressure on print music dealers in the north, Strouse said he knew sales were bound to lean toward one of the two companies. “And [they] did,” he said. “I thought if this is going on in my own backyard, I’d better go somewhere else in the country to compete.”

Strouse stepped up co-promotions with leading publishers, increasing his mailers and sending them to new areas of the country.

“I went after New York, Wisconsin, more around the Midwest than what we had done before, and I’ve actually been able to survive in this flat economy,” he said. “Of course, I say flat is actually up-sales. That’s the new way of looking at it. If [sales] stay flat, I’m still doing good.”

Strouse’s strategy has also meant adjusting where his promotions go. “We do a tremendous amount of church mailings, and I know that’s where we can drive more business,” he said. “The church business is an industry that a lot of companies can’t afford to put themselves in because it’s such an expensive commodity to sell successfully. You have to stock \$80,000–\$150,000 in choral music before anyone would even think [of you]. Since we’re already in that business, I’ve just started adding more Methodist, Presbyterian and Lutheran

[churches] into the mailing list.

“Unless you’re doing promotions, you can’t count on your local business to sell choral music.”

#### ONLINE EXPANSION

Strouse’s other line of attack was creating a presence online, and not just through Stanton’s Web site.

“When I look at where [online] orders are coming from, I sit down and say, ‘Did we solicit anything to them?’” he said. “And most of the time we didn’t. The Internet is bringing new business to us from customers there would be no way I would have been able to reach.”

## Stanton’s Web site offers a listening lab with more than 19,000 recordings of its print music titles

Strouse and an employee recently completed putting together an online listening lab for Stanton’s titles. It required a year to digitize the more than 19,000 recordings from promotional CDs the company had accumulated from publishers. Strouse organized titles under categories, such as Standing Ovations, Animals and Colors (songs like “Blue Suede Shoes” and “Red Balloon,” for example), to make navigating the database fun.

“The listening lab is more popular hit-wise per day than the main site,” Strouse said. “Music directors now create links from their high school band’s site to ours for their students.”

Stanton’s is working on other sites, too. When nearby organ music dealer University Music House closed in 2005, Strouse built a Web site that sells organ music. That means a band instructor Googling “organ sheet music” will get Stanton’s proxy site, organmusiconly.com. He’s also opening a vocal site and is developing a pay-and-download digital sheet music site.

“Once that’s done, I’ll feel like I’ve really pushed the company into the next generation.” **MI**

— Mary Wilcop