

From left:
Peter, Andrew
and Carl Hix

MARKETING & PROMOTIONS HIX BROS. MUSIC

EDUCATION AS ADVERTISING

Hix Bros. Music's two Chicago-area locations sit in a hotbed of big-box retail. But the combo dealer's greatest threat doesn't come from chain-store giants. It comes

from fellow indie music stores.

Since moving into its Aurora, Ill., location in 1999, Hix's executive team — brothers Andrew, Peter and Carl Hix — have watched several local stores launch competitive music

lesson programs. In response, Hix has debuted a number of education offshoots, such as Rock U and the Marching Guitar Band, which have garnered industry-wide attention.

“We're really trying to use

our students as our best marketing tool,” Peter said.

For Rock U, students practice songs in their private lessons and rehearse with a band the week before the show. This is capped off with a final per-



formance at a professional music venue with a backline of high-end gear, lighting and a multiple-camera video shoot. “The kids have a great time, and the parents are happy to see it,” Andrew said.

Hix hosts three Rock U showcases a year. The last one featured 38 bands and brought in nearly 1,000 people, according to Andrew. The program has also attracted musicians of all ages. “Parents get involved, becoming students themselves, so that they have a chance to play and perform with their kids,” Carl said.

“One dad did ‘I Wanna Be Sedated’ with his daughter playing drums,” Peter added, laughing.

According to the Hix brothers, the program has drawn more students into their lesson program, improved retention rates, and inspired students to purchase instruments and upgrade to better gear before shows.

It has also inspired offshoots. The Hix Bros. Junior All-Stars is a band featuring the best Rock U students. Rock Around an Hour and a Half is an eight-week program that teaches students how to write songs and the finer points of playing in a rock band. “Most of the students are in our Rock U program,” Andrew said. “They want to play more.”

And for students seeking extra playing opportunities, Hix recently launched the Marching Guitar Band. This initiative, which is exactly what the name implies, has promoted the Hix Bros. name at local parades and festivals. The most recent iteration featured 60 adults and kids jamming on electric guitars with Roland Micro Cube amplifiers strapped to their belts. They played a medley that blended John Philip Sousa marches with Deep Purple’s “Smoke On The Water.” As an added bonus, the Hix brothers talked their brother-in-law into both serving as the drum major and dressing up as Abraham Lincoln.

“Hopefully, we would’ve gotten the press anyway,” Andrew said. “But because of our Abe Lincoln brother-in-law, we got some really nice coverage in several papers — pictures of Abe Lincoln leading the Hix Bros. marching band.”

Peter added: “Maybe next year, we’ll have Batman do it.” **MI**

— Zach Phillips, photo by Jeff Cagle

MARKETING & PROMOTIONS ZONE MUSIC

Community Marketing

On any given day, Frank Hayhurst might be giving an award to an underappreciated guitarist. He might be hosting a radio show about the local music scene, or his staff might be scrambling to put together an all-out tone fest for gearheads, featuring vendors, artists and sonic options galore.

It’s all part of a promotional strategy designed to entertain and involve current and potential musicians, as well as honor artistic excellence. It’s a strategy Hayhurst, CEO of Zone Music in Cotati, Calif., calls “the community music store.” And it’s a model he said is the future of independent retail.

“If we started doing this as an industry, what we call the independent dealer would have a tremendous advantage that no one else has,” Hayhurst said.

“At all of my events, I try to include a component of inviting the general public and the parents and friends of musicians. We showcase how much fun it is [to play music]. And we invite people who’ve never played before to play for the first time, to feel it.”

ZONE’S WOODSTOCK

He cited a company event this past September celebrating the Sonoma County Blues Society’s 25th anniversary. It featured an afternoon of free live blues in the store’s courtyard; an awards presentation to blues radio DJ Bill Bowker; and a drum circle at the end, where audience members got to jam with percussionist Armando Peraza. “It can’t just be an entertainment event,” Hayhurst said. “It also has to have that participation component.”

“We had 400 people show up in our courtyard. We had blues music with different bands going every 20 minutes, all afternoon.”

Last year’s Jemstock also garnered Zone Music industry-wide attention. Named after the legendary concert festival, the event honored shredder Steve Vai and his Ibanez Jem guitar, which celebrated its 20th anniversary in 2007. Anticipation was so great that Hayhurst had to rent portable toilets and security guards. Roughly 3,000 people showed up to the event, which

was held on Zone’s premises.

“As a result of doing that, people say, ‘Steve Vai got this award and came to Zone Music,’” Hayhurst said. “The store was ferociously busy the day before, the day of and a couple days after. People would come in to see how our preparations were going.”

‘It can’t just be an entertainment event. It also has to have that participation component.’
— Frank Hayhurst

In fact, the store had gotten so busy prior to Jemstock that Hayhurst sent out an e-mail to court volunteers from his customer base. “We had somewhere around 60 or 70 people from our customer base volunteer to come and work for a day at Zone Music for nothing,” he said. “That blew my mind, totally.”

HONORING LOCAL HEROES

Hayhurst stressed that this kind of community-based marketing doesn’t require deep pockets or the grand scale of his events. “Take a local music educator, and celebrate that person’s contributions,” he said. “Take a local radio person who does a calendar of musical events in your area, and celebrate that person. Take a bunch of local bands. Put them together on a night at a club, and celebrate them by giving them an award in front of everybody.”

Sometimes, Hayhurst even honors the MI elite. He presented an award to Rich Lasner, a designer of Vox’s Virage guitar, during his clinic at Zone. “A lot of people came to see us honor Rich Lasner and his new design,” Hayhurst said. “And suddenly, it was about more than just a guitar that’s for sale on the wall.” **MI**

— Zach Phillips