

MY TURN | BY MATT FRAZIER

# A Call for Partnership

When I joined my first rock band in high school, I'd already decided that the drummer was the most important member. (As a matter of pure coincidence, that happened to be me.) Eventually, I understood that the singer has more impact on audience response. But no matter how well the drummer, the singer or even the whole band performs, someone else also has tremendous influence over a group's success: the house sound engineer.

Bands and engineers share a delicate, symbiotic relationship. By reaching out to a few sound techs, I've learned that most want to achieve a good mix for the band, and if treated as partners, they'll give it their best. I find the relationship between MI dealers and vendors has a similar dynamic. Many of us actually have common goals — goals that can be better achieved with a little more partnership.

## REPS IN THE AGE OF TRANSPARENCY

I'm sure some of you are already skeptical of my premise because you've been burned by too many reps. Fair enough. These cases, however, are the exception. Broad-based innovation, impressive upstart manufacturers and a transparent marketplace all make strong-arming dealers nearly impossible for vendors these days. If a rep for big-name brands becomes unpleasant, dealers can simply do business with someone else. I can't think of a single bullet-proof, must-have brand in the MI marketplace anymore.

It's also becoming clear that healthy partnerships foster long-lived, healthy careers and businesses. Retailers and reps are up against the same challenges — not enough end-users and too much competition. And, like sound engineers and bands, we can help make each other more successful, or we can work against each other. As a sales rep, my most adversarial dealers essentially view our business together as transactional. In their view, it's as if every P.O. exists in a vacuum, and the goal is to get the best possible deal on each order regardless of how it might impact our long-term business relationship. The critical flaw in this approach is that a rep will eventually start to focus on other dealers who are easier and more enjoyable to work with.

## THE TRANSACTION IS DEAD

At the same time, some sales reps view each transaction as an end in itself. This is equally as shortsighted, which is why many reps (most, I hope) no longer work this way. If I sell you a bunch of products that are

wrong for your business, I'll have to face you a month later when I walk into your store and see shelves packed with duds I unloaded on you. I don't benefit from that. My success is completely tied to the success of my dealers, and if they don't do well over the long-term, neither do I. On the other hand, when my dealers prosper, I succeed with them. If you work with reps who don't understand the long-term nature of being a business partner, you should move on to other reps.

The roots of vendor/dealer partnerships go deeper than dollars and cents. Like many of my dealers, I got into this line of work because I really like music. I care about the products I sell and the experiences musicians have with them. I want to do this for a while, so your latest P.O. is not the only one that matters to me. If you want to last in this business, too, then whatever order you're working on with whatever vendor shouldn't be the only one that matters to you, either. Vendors and retailers working together can make our businesses better and our jobs more enjoyable. We can even help keep musicians making music. And that's a common goal worth pursuing. **MI**

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