

THE LESSON ROOM | BY PETE GAMBER

Retaining Students

I've talked a lot about building music lesson programs by attracting new students. While it's great to boost sign-up numbers, that's only half the battle. In the same month you have 50 new sign-ups, you can have 54 drop-outs. It's time to focus on retention.

Aside from the benefits of boosting your numbers, retained students and their families also get excited about music making. They talk about your store and your teachers. In other words, retaining students creates a buzz in your community.

GET DATA

You can't improve retention if you don't track it. You need data. First, you need to find out how many students you're signing up in a month. Use your music lesson registration form or card. Count the sign-ups each day, and mark them on a special calendar or computer. At the end of the month, you'll have a grand total. Next, make a "drop lessons" form or card. Include a student's info, teacher, start date and reason for dropping. Mark the number of drops on a daily basis to obtain your end-of-month total.

You now have some data. How many drops do you have per particular teacher? Why are students dropping? Without this, you can't improve your retention. Set a goal to reduce your percentage of "lesson shrinkage." If you're at 15 percent, shoot for 5 percent.

INCREASE RETENTION

There are different reasons people quit taking music lessons. You don't have control over all of these, but you do over many.

Some of these can be fixed in the drop process. Time and scheduling conflicts can often be resolved by asking, "What time and/or day works for you?"

I can check with your teacher." Or say, "I'll set you up with another teacher."

If a student's bored or not learning anything, find out what the teacher's teaching. Is the teacher using a book that comes with CDs? Move the student to another teacher with a high retention rate, or make sure the student brings in a song he or she wants to learn each week. If the student says he or she doesn't need lessons anymore, find out if the teacher has set challenging goals. There's also the student who never wanted to play but was forced into it by parents. This is a tough one. What does the kid want to play? Start there.

Some teacher issues are obvious. If a teacher's a flake, switch the student to

another instructor, and have a heart-to-heart with the teacher. If there isn't improvement, quit booking the teacher lessons.

What about that drum teacher who forces students to play on a drum pad and snare for two years before moving on to the drum set? The student wants to learn — and quickly. Better get the kid on a set.

Other teacher issues are less obvious. I had a teacher in the 1970s that started losing students because they thought he couldn't play. I knew the guy played phenomenally, but he'd never learned "Stairway to Heaven." He learned the song, and that ended his retention problems. Address these issues with the teacher. He or she may not be aware of the problem.

Take a look at your program, too. Student performance opportunities are a must. The more students get on a stage to play early in their learning processes, your retention will skyrocket. People want to learn to play, not take lessons. And parents, family and friends want to see the musician grow.

Following up with new lesson sign-ups is also a must. Call every student's parent after the second lesson, and see how things are going. Discover any issues before the student drops. **MI**

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Tons of lesson sign-ups won't matter if you keep losing students. Get data on your drop-outs, and look for patterns