

THE CUSTOMER WHISPERER | BY GREG BILLINGS

Music Store Idol

I don't like "American Idol." It aggravates me when people talk about it as if it were something important or significant. I'll confess that I've never watched more than three minutes of it. I'll also confess that the reason I don't like "American Idol" is because I'm a snob. I'm not even that good a musician, but I've been playing and listening long enough to know when it's real and when it's not.

That said, I love what "American Idol" has done for our culture. Fascination with this musical melodrama has brought about a democratization of how we view talent. Now, everybody believes anybody can be a star, and they believe *they* can be stars, too. America is not only willing to watch amateurs, but we'll forgive their flaws — even root for them.

The "American Idol" phenomenon presents a wonderful opportunity for music dealers. No one is more susceptible to the allure of spotlights and applause than our customers, so talent shows are a perfect vehicle for community-oriented dealers who want to build their local reputation and strengthen their customer relationships. We can put our customers and prospects onstage and make them "music store idols." Best of all, we can generate valuable PR, the kind you can't buy.

THE TALENT SHOW FORMAT

Almost five years ago, we stumbled into our first talent show, mostly by accident. We were at a Steinway dealer meeting and saw a short presentation about an innovative way Schmitt Music was cultivating doctors — an important but elusive demographic to piano and high-end guitar dealers — with a physicians' piano recital. My wife is a nurse, and through her job at the hospital, she's acquainted with most of the doctors in town. She told me that she could recruit doctors to perform if we supported the right charity, and she started putting out feelers.

One of the docs said, "That sounds boring. Why don't you do a talent show instead?" In that moment, the Physicians' Talent Show was born. (I later found out that Schmitt Music's piano recital also evolved into a talent show.) What followed had a dramatic effect on our presence in the community; our relationships with clients, vendors and prospects; and our advertising budget.

GETTING OTHER PEOPLE'S MONEY

Our first task was to select the right charity. We wanted to benefit our own Steinway Piano Society Scholarship Fund, but we also needed something the docs could identify with on a gut level. We selected the Neighborhood Health Clinic (NHC) because hundreds of physician volunteers work there. The hospital was happy to support the NHC because it keeps uninsured people out of the ER. Plus, NHC is easy to work with and grateful for support.

Community involvement eventually comes down to money. There are only two kinds of philanthropy: the kind where you are giving away your own money and the kind where you are giving away other people's money (or OPM, as I call it). As music dealers, we can't do much good with the amount of our own money we can afford to give away. The key to getting OPM is partnership.

By partnering with NHC, a door opened to partner with the local physicians' association and gain access to its well-guarded list of doctors' home addresses. That relationship opened a door to bring the hospital on as a principal sponsor (\$5,000 of OPM), which opened the door to get additional sponsors (even more OPM).

Partnership can be very use-



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ful for a dealer without a 501(c)(3) charter because the dealer can take tax-deductible contributions and sell tickets under the partner's charter. If you pick the right partner, it may be willing to do the book-keeping, provide volunteers and conduct a silent auction. Not-for-profit organizations pay less for everything, from theater rent to advertising. Not to mention the press loves not-for-profits.

Using the physicians' association list, we mailed a postcard to all the local physicians inviting them to perform. This also promoted the event. We approached the local newspaper, city magazine and public radio station and offered them the opportunity to become in-kind (non-cash) sponsors for our "charity" event. The PR machine was in motion.

In addition to free advertising, we've had newspaper stories before and after the shows, magazine articles, society page pictures, and full-hour National Public Radio affiliate interviews. Last year, the local PBS TV station produced an 18-minute segment about our show for its video magazine, *Connect*. It filmed physicians in our Gallery talking about the importance of music in their lives and about our commitment to the community. The program ran more than 20 times. It's hard to put monetary value on that kind of PR.

TALENT SEARCH

We had four business objectives in producing the Physicians' Talent Show: raise awareness about our Gallery among the medical community; raise our stature among the medical community; generate favorable, free press; and benefit the NHC and our Steinway Piano Society.

To our surprise, and initial

disappointment, the talent applicants represented a broad spectrum. We heard from many guitarists and singers but only a few pianists. We also heard from horn players, comedians and dancers. We even had a magician and a dentist who played the musical saw. It quickly became apparent that this was going to be a variety show. I wouldn't have been surprised to see a juggler or a dog act.

We found physicians who had bands, some who had put themselves through medical school playing in saloons and many who hadn't played for years. Soon, we realized the small number of pianists wasn't a problem, after all. Greater variety made the show more entertaining and the entire event more festive.

Once we had a talent roster finalized, we began rehearsing in our recital hall. When people visit your store three times, they begin to identify with it and are much less likely to visit a competitor — ever. They are also much more likely to recommend your store to others. And docs are likely to seek referrals from other docs.

We needed about four weeks of rehearsal since physicians' schedules are so erratic. Rehearsing here is broadly defined. Some acts, such as the magician and the Klezmer band, were self-contained and required no work at all. A few hadn't played for years and needed the band to carry them. Many needed help selecting appropriate material. Almost all of them required encouragement and cheerleading. Clearly, the doctors had ventured beyond their comfort zones, and we were able to use our calm, assertive leadership to guide them.

We promised each physician that we would make them look



+ TALENT SHOW CHECKLIST

- Pick a date four to six months in advance when your business is off-cycle. You'll need to devote time to the event.
- Select a venue big enough to accommodate the show but small enough that you can fill it, where your talent will be proud to perform.
- Find the right charity to benefit. (Ask your talent for suggestions.)
- Identify a principal sponsor, and go after the big bucks.
- Identify other sponsors, and start pitching.
- Set up a Web site to post rehearsal schedules and other information.
- Start recruiting talent. When in doubt, schedule informal auditions. Mail postcards to doctors on your mailing list, and find appropriate partners with lists.
- Get free recruitment and show ads from local media by making them in-kind sponsors.
- Make personalized posters your talent can display in their offices, and give them tickets to sell. (Keep careful track. No free tickets for anyone until 24 hours before the show and only if you need to fill the house.)
- Every time you send an e-mail, thank people for their support and participation.
- Put together a backup band, and appoint a music director. Use your employees and customers. Worship bands are a great place to find volunteer musicians.
- Encourage the talent to do material they can do well and that translates well live.
- Recruit volunteers: sound people, stagehands, ticket sellers, servers, silent auction staff and PR people. There are many college students who need community-service hours, and some of them are probably your customers.
- Select a venue for the dress rehearsal. Churches are good because they have sound and are happy to help.
- Host a cast party after dress rehearsal, hopefully at your house. Let your charity provide volunteers to do the work.
- Start rehearsals four weeks out. Record rehearsals on a simple recorder, such as an Edirol R-09, and e-mail talent their tracks. This is remarkably effective and also helps time the acts.
- Write a script, and time the show. Keep it under 90 minutes. A rule of thumb is the show will run double the sum of the time of the individual acts.
- Make sure the emcee knows he has to stick to the script, and drill it in that it's his responsibility to keep the show moving.
- Record the dress rehearsal rather than the show, and post the tracks where your talent can get them.
- Take lots of pictures, and post them, too. Send thank-you notes.
- Recognize from the beginning that you are the show's producer. Lead with calm assertiveness. Be firm, friendly and fair, but most of all, be decisive.
- Err on the side of simplicity.

and sound great. Often, this meant suggesting the song that he or she wanted to do wouldn't work in a live setting and that executing something simple well is preferable to executing something complicated poorly. (It's vital to gain their trust.) More important, we promised them that they would have fun!

FINDING VOLUNTEERS

As we accepted talent applications and narrowed the material, a few things became clear. If I was going to keep that promise, I was going to need a pretty good band. And that band would have to be able to play everything from country to jazz to Broadway to gospel. We were also going to need a vocal coach, accompanists, an emcee and many other volunteers.

The great thing about being in a music store is that you can find all the help you need among your employees and customers. This has the added benefit of getting prospects and customers involved with your staff. And when you ask your friends to contribute their talents to a worthy charity, it's hard for them to say "no."

To keep things manageable and to encourage camaraderie, we asked the more talented physicians to help back up the other acts. We also arranged duets and ensembles. By show time, we had a large group of committed people working toward a common goal — and doing so in our store and looking to us for leadership. They started getting their associates, friends and family to buy tickets, and they started buying strings, cables, wireless kits and wardrobes.

Soon, the show took on a life of its own. By dress rehearsal, friendships had formed, and the perception of our Gallery was enhanced. For

two weeks surrounding the event, we were the No. 1 topic at water coolers all over town.

RAISING FUNDS

Fund raising also benefitted our image. Even at \$75 per ticket, we could only raise so

much money in a 300-seat theater, and a certain number of tickets got gobbled up by the cast. (We give two free tickets to each performer, and they almost always bought more.)

The best ways to increase revenue are selling sponsorships and holding a silent auction in the lobby before the show. This is community outreaching at a grass-roots level.



You may recoil at the idea of asking others for money, but when you ask someone to purchase a \$1,000 sponsorship — or, if that's not possible, to contribute a gift item to a silent auction — you've taken your stature up several notches. You've transcended being a businessperson and become a philanthropist in everyone's eyes.

There are many businesses thankful for the opportunity to take their messages directly to an elite medical audience: pharmaceutical companies, assisted living facilities and home health service providers. Also, banks, financial service providers, high-end designers and furni-

ture stores, restaurants, and wine merchants are good candidates for sponsorship.

ALTERNATE FORMATS

Talent shows aren't the only way to get your customers onstage. Schmitt Music has done a great job with its Physicians' Piano Recital, and R. Scott Schoppert, keyboard manager of its Sioux Falls, S.D., location, found a way to escape local medical politics. By benefiting the Children's Care Hospital, he was able to sell \$5,000 sponsorships to both of the big competing hospitals in town. More than 800 people attended his fifth show this year. "Originally, we leveraged it into a selling event, but now I get residual sales from physicians almost every month with no overt marketing," he said.

And physicians aren't the only group worth featuring. Jim Foster at Foster Family Music in Davenport, Iowa, has created Piano Celebration, an annual fundraiser for Ronald

McDonald House.

"It brings together teachers, students and professional musicians to a common cause: raising awareness for the benefits of piano study," Foster said.

Ellen McDonald of Hartland Music Center in Wisconsin has been conducting a Hartland Idol talent contest for high school kids, complete with local celebrity judges, for the last two years. Other dealers have hosted open mic nights.

We recently presented our second Pastors' Talent Show. It has drawn a much bigger audience (at a lower ticket price and with a different group of sponsors), and we're seeing a similar benefit to our reputation among the church community. Of course, the local Christian radio station was happy to partner with us.

What caught us by surprise, though it shouldn't have, was the profound effect being in the show had on the performers. For many, their love of music was reawakened. For some, standing onstage in front of their friends, families and peers was the fulfillment of a dream. And for most, the camaraderie of preparing the show forged strong bonds with their fellow performers and with us. I'd be surprised if any of the physicians, pastors or volunteers in any of our shows ever patronized one of my competitors. We have become friends — trusted friends.

Dealers that want to do more than just talk about community involvement will find presenting a talent show a natural vehicle. It's a great way to embrace and motivate your staff, your customers and your prospects. Most of all, it's fun. **MI**

Greg Billings whispers to customers at the Steinway Piano Gallery in Bonita Springs, Fla. He welcomes questions and comments at greg@steinwaynaples.com.