

THE CUSTOMER WHISPERER | BY GREG BILLINGS

# Recital Hall? 15 Uses

There seem to be two schools of thought on having a performance space in a music store: those who don't have one but wish they did, and those who have one but wonder if the space is worth the expense.

In the late 1960s and '70s, during the glory days of the organ business, Conn Music Center was the biggest Conn dealer in the United States and one of the most successful organ dealers in the brutally competitive Chicago market. Owner Pete Wycoff created a beautiful store in a former movie theater, preserving some of the original space to create The Wycoff

Theatre. I remember calling on him and thinking, "What a colossal waste of space."

It turned out that The Wycoff Theatre was one of the keys to his success. Along with hosting organ concerts, which was a big part of selling organs, he had his teachers present student recitals in a professional venue. Still, the hall was empty 98 percent of the time.

## THE STEINWAY HALL MODEL

Irene Besse of Irene Besse Keyboards in Calgary, Alberta, may have the most impressive performance facility of any modern piano dealer. Her concert hall seats 310 and features professional light and sound, an Internet connection, a giant video screen, a balcony, and chandeliers. Still, managing a hall that size presents its own set of problems.

"We are seriously looking at hiring someone full-time to run the hall," she said. "It is well-appointed but not being utilized to its maximum."

"We had 135 events last year that ranged from teacher/student recitals to professional concerts," said Charles Rempel, president of Charles Piano in Albuquerque, N.M. He added that he's convinced that the activity leads to referrals and sales.

Charles and Irene are following the example of William Steinway, arguably the greatest musical instrument marketer of all time. When he opened Steinway Hall in New York, it instantly became the most important performance venue in the city and remained so until Carnegie Hall opened. Steinway understood that by associating his retail store with musical performances he could differentiate his company from his competitors and build one of the world's most recognized brands.

People perceive places where they experience things differently than places where they buy things. Performance connects the dots between the instru-

ment and the experience, harnessing the value of customers' emotional response to music. Apple and Whole Foods understand well the benefit of making a visit to their stores an experience rather than chore.

Whether the performance is a professional concert or a kids' recital, the effect on your guests is the same: a rush of warm feelings triggered by the hormonal release of dopamine to the nucleus accumbens deep in their brains. Clients will forever connect those feelings to the place where they occurred. The more often people visit your store and have a pleasant experience, the less likely they will be to shop anywhere else. And they are very likely to refer their friends and neighbors, especially if you ask them to.

So, it makes sense to bring lots of people to your store and make sure they have a gratifying experience. Nothing brings the masses through your door like hosting recitals and events. The challenge is to do it in a cost-effective way that stimulates your business without distracting you and your employees from your primary task: selling.

## THE OPPORTUNITY IN RECITALS

The most common in-store performance is the traditional student recital — an important tool in nurturing relationships with your best teachers and their students.



**Fifteen things to do with a recital hall — even if you don't have one**

While your community may have plenty of 200-plus seat churches available, you can offer a more intimate and interesting venue. At the Steinway Piano Gallery in Madison, Wis., a semi-permanent stage sits in a corner of the showroom. The performance space includes professional sound and lighting, a video projector, and video-recording capability. It seats 40. It takes a little effort to set up chairs and rearrange displays, but an extra 1,200 square feet of prime retail for a concert hall would be very expensive.

Reifsnnyder's Piano in Lancaster, Pa., also converts its showroom for recitals. "Several of the teachers [who use our space] have worked with parents looking for new pianos," said Bill Crabtree, owner of

Reifsnnyder's Piano. "They have given us names, levels of playing and introduced us at the recitals. We have made sales just because folks had a chance to walk around after a recital in a more relaxed atmosphere."

Charlie Hunt of Music Gallery in Clearwater, Fla., has found similar success with his permanent, 140-seat hall. He said it generates step-up sales and prospects at nearly every recital, and some teachers even drive 50 miles to use the space.

Still, these events can easily become routine, and turning over space to outsiders can get hairy without a few simple controls. Craig Gigax, president of Meridian Music in Indianapolis, has put a lot of thought into managing the 120-seat Munger Hall, named

for a local dignitary.

"A single staff person manages the recital hall schedule and is responsible for ensuring that the hall is set up and clean," Gigax said. "We have a contract that specifies 'cans and cannots.' Teachers can view the schedule on our Web site and request specific dates."

**THE TEACHER FACTOR**

There are only two kinds of music teachers who'll use your hall: those who provide referrals that result in sales and those who don't. (There is a third set of teachers who don't provide referrals in the short-term but may eventually.) There are also a limited number of Saturday afternoons between Thanksgiving and Christmas and between Easter and the end

of the school year. Therefore, it's important to ensure the right teachers are in your facility at the right time. One easy way to reward your most important teachers — those who've referred a student within the last year — is to let them schedule their recitals 180 days in advance, while non-referring teachers only get 90 days.

Sherman Clay President Tom Austin, who has a permanent recital hall (or a convertible Steinway room) in each of his stores, has a simple policy. "We either get referrals/sales or we get paid for the room," he said.

Jim Fishback, president of Fresno Pianos in Fresno, Calif., comes at it from a softer side. "We do not charge unless the teacher is not part of our

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partnership,” he said. “We ask the teacher to be a part of the store, to sit down with us, learn a little about us and how we can work together, and explain how we thank teachers for the trust they show in us by referring students.”

Dennis Saphir at Kurt Saphir Pianos in Wilmette, Ill., has figured out how to reward his friends and partners. His hall is booked through April 2011 with recitals for referral-generating teachers.

**RECITAL GUIDELINES**

Because you can only have meaningful exchanges with a limited number of parents in the short time before and after each recital, it’s important to limit the number of guests at each event. An audience of 50–60 is ideal at our Naples Steinway Piano Gallery. Having a huge recital turnout may stroke the ego, but it’s a challenge to personally greet every guest and spend time with the most important people.

It is unreasonable to expect any 2 or 3 year old to sit quietly through an hour-long recital. We have found that the youngest guests start to get pretty noisy at about 44 minutes. We encourage teachers with larger groups to have smaller, consecutive recitals. It’s initially challenging to get them on-board, but they eventually come to understand that everyone enjoys the recital more.

It’s important to make sure your guests see your showroom, as well as your hall. Gigax funnels recital patrons through his showroom rather than using a more direct route. This assures that everyone sees his wares and that he gets to greet parents personally. Gigax understands that recitals may be routine to his staff and the teachers but that they are a big deal to the



The Steinway Piano Gallery in Madison, Wis., hosts groups, such as The Schubert Club (pictured), in its performance space



Irene Besse Keyboards in Calgary, Alberta, has even hosted weddings in its luxurious performance hall

parents and students.

Recitals also give you, the host, a perfect opportunity to give a three-minute speech where you welcome the parents, congratulate the students, praise the teacher, discuss the benefits of music education and talk about upcoming events at the store.

“We like to greet each recital with a ‘welcome’ and acknowledge each teacher for her work with the students,” Hunt said. “We often joke that all pianos are for sale and this is not a museum, and we talk about the benefits of having a good piano. We have a flat screen showing various Steinway DVDs before each recital.”

“It’s amazing that by doing this, you are no longer the salesman and become a friend of the teacher,” Fishback said.

Modern technology has made

preserving and delivering the experience easier. At Steinway Piano Gallery in Madison, my son, Grant, has been making high-definition video recordings of student recitals and posting them on a limited-access Web site. Parents love it.

**15 OTHER RECITAL HALL USES ...**

But for those who have built a recital hall, the question remains: How can this valuable space be used in the 60 hours a week and 30 weeks a year when no recital is being held? We use our hall for Steinway Piano Society concerts, films and clinics, but that only fills a dozen extra dates. Here are a few other things we do, along with great examples from other dealers.

A recital hall is an ideal place for a party. You might think your store is a boring place of business, but most

people think a music store is fascinating. Three years ago, we started letting local charities auction off an “Evening of Wine and Music at the Steinway Piano Gallery.” For the cost of a case of wine, some cheese and crackers and a pianist, we fill our Gallery with 30 well-healed, potential customers for an evening when we would otherwise be closed. Auction winners have used the hall for birthday parties, reunions and even office Christmas parties. We show a Steinway grand with the QRS Qsync DVD player system to revelers and occasionally make an immediate sale.

A variation on the party theme is the client development event, where an enterprising financial planner will bring his clients to our Gallery. In this case, the host pays for the wine, hors d’oeuvres and pianist. And he or she brings an even more prosperous clientele to our Gallery.

Several dealers open their halls to local pianists for recording and to traveling pianists and symphony players as rehearsal spaces. We’ve had a few of these pianists volunteer to perform at our Steinway Piano Society recitals out of gratitude.

Community groups always need a place to meet, but it is important to keep them rotating and not become anyone’s permanent home. “We allow non-profits to use our halls for events, such as symphony fundraisers and board meetings,” said Peter Sides of Robert M. Sides Family Music in Williamsport, Pa. “Our governor gave a stump speech there back in 2000, and that generated lots of traffic.”

Any hall with a video projector can show movies. We did local premiers for Ben Niles’ “Note By Note” in each of our

Galleries, as did many other Steinway dealers. A band instrument dealer could show "The Music Man." (Don't forget the popcorn and Milk Duds.)

Community colleges and established music studios are thrilled to have access to a hall for use as an adult community education classroom. They bring intelligent, motivated people into a music store.

Halls are a great place for group lessons and social, play-for-fun programs.

Our hall also serves as a rehearsal space for our Physicians' and Pastors' Talent Shows. After the docs and padres have rehearsed there a few times, they start to feel very comfortable in our store. Other dealers provide rehearsal space for all kinds of community events.

We conduct our annual Young Artist Piano Competition in the hall and make it available for other competitions. Other dealers agreed that hosting competitions is a great way to meet new teachers and students.

Hunt at the Music Gallery in Clearwater uses his hall for morning and evening Kindermusik classes during the week and Suzuki classes on weekends, exposing his Gallery to important future customers.

If you're not open for business on Sunday morning (and who is), a new church can meet in your recital hall for its first six months. This is a good way to build your reputation in the church community and make friends for life.

Skip Daynes at Daynes

Music in Salt Lake City makes his beautiful hall available to university piano teachers who give lessons to their most advanced students, enhancing his relationships with both teachers and students.

Barbara Wanless at Steinway Piano Gallery in Milwaukee remodeled her basement into a recital hall and presents lunchtime brown bag concerts for local businesspeople.

Saphir uses his hall for special product promotion displays, in which performances are often an important part.

Besse has even used her hall for weddings. Now that is a golden memory.

And finally, Charles Gorling, general manager of the piano division at Tom Lee Music in Vancouver, British Columbia, uses his company's

240-seat hall for all of the above and posts videos of the events on Tom Lee Music's own TLM Music Channel, courtesy of YouTube.

A recital hall can bring people through your door, but it's like a message sign: I can be very useful and effective if used properly but a terrible waste of effort if neglected. Whether in a dedicated room or fluid space, musical performances in your store will enhance your business and strengthen your relationships with students, teachers and future customers. Music has a magical effect on people, and musical performances in your store can have a magical effect on your business. **MI**

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

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