

IDEAS

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THE CUSTOMER WHISPERER | BY GREG BILLINGS

WHY I DON'T SELL PIANOS ONLINE ...

Dr. Smith (name changed to protect the foolish) was a typical prospective client. A successful physician practicing somewhere in the Midwest, he purchased a retirement home on Marco Island. We met when he stopped by the Gallery last year looking for a vintage Steinway grand for his Marco home. We didn't have the size he wanted, but he said he wasn't in a hurry.

During the next few months, I let him know about various pianos that came along, and last spring, I was disappointed to learn that he'd purchased a 1922 Model A on eBay. He, of course, was thrilled to have found a completely rebuilt and refinished piano for less than \$20,000. I was suspicious because the cost of properly rebuilding and refinishing a Steinway grand alone is more than \$20,000.

THE STING

Still, the good doctor was excited to hear about Pianomation



... and why you shouldn't either

II from QRS. We agreed that the Gallery would receive and inspect his piano and install the player. The seller reluctantly agreed to ship the piano to us, and about a month later, it arrived late on a Friday afternoon. It only took 15 seconds to see that something

was fishy. The legs on the piano weren't from 1922. And things got worse, fast.

The piano had been refinished some time ago with a black lacquer I'd never seen before; it was somewhere between high-polish and not high-polish. The finish was very cloudy with deep surface scratches. The oversized pins indicated the pinplank hadn't been replaced, and some of the cheap plastic keytops were coming unglued. All the action parts were original and worn.

"Maybe they just got the date wrong," said our tech.

Vintage pianos are dated by looking up the serial number in the venerable *Pierce Piano Atlas*. But here's the thing about serial numbers: They're stamped in ink on the piano's plate. So, when you refinish the plate, you have to reapply a serial number — hopefully, the original one. The new serial number on this plate disagreed with the shadow of the old serial number I could see partially through the new finish (because they hadn't properly

stripped and sanded the plate). I checked the key frame, another spot where you can find a Steinway's serial number. This is where the story turns ugly. The serial number had been sanded off of the key frame.

There are many reasons why someone would remove the serial number from a piano, a car or a gun. None of them are good reasons. By now, I was feeling a little queasy about the whole investigation, so I sent an e-mail to my good friend David Kirkland, head of archival services at Steinway & Sons in New York. He promptly wrote back that the serial number in question had been assigned to a mahogany M sold in New York in 1926. This piano was an impostor.

It's not unusual to find suspicious Steinways. Not all Steinway rebuilders are Steinway dealers, and not all have the same standards. A large number of pianos in various degrees of decay come from schools, churches and estates. Some shops even cannibalize several pianos to

come up with enough parts for a complete piano. We don't do it — I don't know any good shops that do — but it happens.

Without further investigation, I called Dr. Smith to report what I'd learned so far. After discussing the possibility of starting the restoration from scratch, he said, "But I'll still have a piano with a phony serial number." I suggested we could determine the correct serial number, but at that point, he felt deceived. Of course, he had been deceived.

A few minutes later, I got a call from the seller who wanted to argue with me about my assessment. He protested that he hadn't broken any eBay rules. I suggested that he review the e-mail I received from Steinway & Sons, and I forwarded it to him.

'No matter how much buyers protest price in the beginning of their searches, in the end, most of them are more concerned about quality and value than price.'

I never heard from him again. After numerous phone calls and broken promises, the piano was picked up by a guy moving pianos in a horse trailer. Dr. Smith

eventually got most of his money back. He has put off buying a piano until next season and isn't returning calls or e-mails.

CLOSE CALL

Had the piano been delivered to his home and the problems discovered over time, it's unlikely he would have been able to return the piano. We had a similar case with a seller on Craigslist and were able to help the customer get a refund. She eventually bought a piano from us.

A search of pianos for sale online will reveal mostly gray-market Yamahas, private-label low-end imports, some obscure new piano brands, a few Steinways like the one described and a motley collection of worn-out used pianos. Why has the piano

market failed to present reasonable offerings online, thereby opening up a vacuum filled by carpetbaggers, when other industry segments have successfully exploited Internet marketing?

There are several reasons.

First, none of the major piano suppliers lets its new pianos be sold online. My guess is if they thought this was a viable way to market pianos, they would do it themselves. Why would they need dealers if they could sell their pianos from a Web page? The absence of high-quality, name-brand merchandise opens up an opportunity for bottom feeders.

IT'S ALL ABOUT THE MATH

Next, pianos are big, heavy, bulky instruments that must be wrangled into place, wrestled

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into tune and constantly serviced. The piano business is not for the faint of heart. It's almost impossible to move a piano any significant distance for less than \$1,000. With locals selling old consoles and spinets on Craigslist for a couple of hundred dollars, delivering one across a state makes almost no economic sense. And properly regulating and voicing a 20-year-old upright is so expensive that the cost cannot be recovered selling at the current market price. So, anyone purchasing a middle-aged console online will probably have a piano with performance far below even an inexpensive new model bought from a local dealer. When it comes to uprights, the math just doesn't work.

Grands are a different story.

I suppose one could justify a \$1,200 moving bill for a \$5,000 piano, but wouldn't the customer be better off buying a \$6,200 piano locally? And if we have a client in our store considering a \$6,200 purchase, might we have a chance to sell them a really good piano? No matter how much buyers protest price in the beginning of their searches, in the end, most of them are more concerned about quality and value than price.

If we arbitrarily assume that 10 percent of the purchase price was a reasonable freight cost, we could reason that \$12,000–\$15,000 pianos would be a viable Internet product. Of course, this is precisely the entry price range of pianos major manufacturers won't allow to be sold online.

LEFTOVERS

This leaves private-label imports and used grands as the most likely candidates for Internet selling. Most used grands are more than 25 years old and need extensive action work to be appropriate for normal use. Regulating and voicing a grand action, without parts, is nearly a week's work for a trained technician. Therefore, selling one of these pianos for less than \$5,000 is problematic unless you cut corners, which is dangerous to do on a piano you're shipping out of town.

The problem with used pianos is that there aren't many good ones. We're able to sell all the good pianos we get on trade to local customers without much difficulty. And given the market disruption caused by Craigslist,

we have no incentive to buy up used pianos as we did a generation ago. That said, there's still a very good business to be had nursing old Steinways back to life. Properly rebuilt and refinished, their selling price justifies the investment. Since we can sell them locally, why would we want to market them to the lowest-price buyer online?

THE BIG QUESTION

This is the fundamental business question at hand. Do we really want to be the lowest-cost piano provider? The Internet shopper naturally gravitates toward price because it's not reasonable to present products as subjective as acoustic musical instruments on a 13-inch screen, through 2-inch speakers.

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It's impossible to be the lowest-cost provider on the Internet because there will always be someone, somewhere willing to advertise a lower price. Countless hours can be wasted negotiating with out-of-town prospects who want the lowest price. In the rare cases where a sale is made, it's for less money than we could sell the piano for locally. We love pianos and our customers. We want to provide excellent, meticulously prepared instruments to clients who will enjoy them for generations, pay us to service them and refer their friends. We cannot fulfill that mission and be the low-cost provider.

LIES, LIES, LIES

And finally, the Internet can be a liar's club. Posters are

invisible and unaccountable. A perfect example is the supposed testimonials on their websites. In 35 years, we have received hundreds of thank yous from customers. Usually, they are cards and rarely more than a sentence or two. Mostly, they thank us for the flowers we send with deliveries.

I'll go out on a limb and say most of the testimonials I've seen online are fabrications. The same is true with the endorsements. Pianists just aren't predisposed to write long evaluations. The majority of evaluations I have seen were biased. Many were ridiculous.

We've serviced a half-dozen or so pianos people have bought online. None is a great piano, and none of the customers got

'It's impossible to be the lowest-cost provider on the Internet because there will always be someone, somewhere willing to advertise a lower price.'

a particularly good deal. Some of them are nightmares.

The bottom line: Unless you're

willing to cut corners and provide poor customer value, like the dealer who sold Dr. Smith his ill-fated Steinway, you're unlikely to make much money selling pianos online. And if getting customers' money by providing poor value is your objective, why mess with pianos? They're too big, too heavy and too much trouble.

Many of us remaining in the piano business are committed to our customers and our products. It's hard work but very rewarding. The Internet is a great place to find and communicate with customers. But we want them to see, touch and play their pianos before taking them home. **MI**

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

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