

FROM THE TRENCHES | BY MYRNA SISLEN

I Love a Parade

On the Fourth of July, my store, Middle C Music, joined in the parade through D.C.'s Palisades neighborhood. If your store does not participate in a community parade, I urge you to start doing so. It not only integrates you further into your community but also introduces thousands of potential customers to your brand.

Of course, there's considerable work involved, but once you get it down, you can repeat your process, more or less, every year.



First, you need cars. Every year, I borrow a convertible from the Volkswagen dealer down the street. He puts his sign on the car door, and in return, we get a new convertible to showcase our musicians. Any of your teachers or students will do fine. One year, I had two beautiful female guitarists. Another year, I had two brothers playing alto sax and drums. This year, I had two ukulele players. (You'll need a battery-powered amp.)

In front of the convertible are two marchers holding our 3- by 3-foot store banner. I actually have four vinyl banners, along with July Fourth decorations, to festoon the cars. Everyone who participates gets a Middle C Music T-shirt.

Following the convertible is the marching band. The band is always a challenge for us. We don't have a regular marching band, so for the parade, we have to cobble together whatever instruments we can get from students who haven't left for vacation. Last year, we had clarinets and flutes. This year, my trumpet teacher led the group, and we had three trombones, an alto sax and two piccolos for "The Stars And Stripes Forever." You're marching, so you only need the chorus of one tune that can be repeated. We had two rehearsals, mostly to practice the marching.

That said, I recommend more rehearsals.

My customers and employees march with the band and hand out coupons. These are good for one free gift, a kazoo, and they're neon-yellow, printed with our logo, address and Web information. Be sure to include an expiration date. Mine is Aug. 31. I normally have about two dozen people redeem the coupons, and

I hand out about 1,500.

Bringing up the rear of our contingent is my SUV. I have one child standing in my moonroof playing a trumpet and other kids in the car throwing candy. I also have a child throwing candy from the convertible. Hard candy from Costco is best.

I march along with everyone to keep the other marchers together and choreograph their moves, greet the audience, ensure that everyone has plenty of water, and make sure the kids don't throw out all the candy on the first block of the parade.

Every year, I worry that either the musicians or the marchers won't show up, and every year, it's "the magic of theater" and everything works.

It was true this year, too. When we got in line, ready for the parade to start, a tuba player approached us. With him were a drummer, trombone player and alto sax player, and they were wicked good.

"We're a band in need of a home," the tuba player said. "We love Middle C. Can we join you?"

It took me less than a second to say "yes." I gave them T-shirts, and we were on our way.

This year's parade turned out to be our best ever, with my little band blending wonderfully with the hot new guys. Truly, the magic of theater. **MI**

Myrna Sislen owns and operates Middle C Music in Washington, D.C.

Joining a parade exposes your brand to thousands of potential customers