

FROM THE TRENCHES | BY MYRNA SISLEN

# Outside the Box

I've argued before that the best thing you can do for your business is to get out of your store and attend one of our industry trade shows. This time, I'm once again an example of what a good idea that can be.

At the 2014 NASMD convention in San Antonio, Texas, furniture dealer Tim Smithe spoke about the TV ads he does for his company, Walter E. Smithe Furniture in Chicago. He showed us some of his spots: They were funny, clever and way outside the box compared to "normal" TV ads. I came back from the convention asking myself how I could do that. It wouldn't be easy: Smithe's ads cost \$250,000, which is a little outside my own budget. Actually, it's \$250,000 outside my budget.



## Making and running a TV ad doesn't have to break the bank

Nevertheless, once back home I announced a contest for all my teachers and staff: I would pay the winner \$100 cash to come up with a jingle or song for an ad. One of my piano/guitar teachers, Brock Holmes, wrote lyrics about Middle C Music to the Beatles song, "Come Together." Everyone loved it. Concerned about copyright laws, I asked Larry Morton, president of Hal Leonard, and he told me that it would be safe under the "Weird Al Yankovich" clause. If it's a parody, we are legally safe.

My staff helped in all aspects of making of the commercial. Staffer Dave Nuttycombe, who has made documentaries, shot the ad in-store using a Panasonic Pro AG-DVC30 3-CCD MiniDV Camcorder. Store manager Matthew Elias did the sound mixing using an Audio Box, which we stock and he also taught the whole staff not only how to use it, but how to sell it. Great added benefit.

Legendary rocker Mark Noone teaches at Middle C, and he did the vocals. Because everything was done on store time, the expense to me was zero.

During production, Mark Noone told me that a friend of his was selling advertising time on a cable channel called Me-TV. The ad rep explained that the beauty of advertising on such a station is that it doesn't have a Nielsen audience rating, and therefore the ad rates are very low. Me-TV rates run from \$9–\$20 for a 60-second spot. Well, that certainly seemed reasonable. I could get 40 spots for \$750 a

month and they would throw in a couple extra at odd times. Me-TV runs classic shows, such as "Perry Mason" and "Get Smart." But, does anyone watch it? I did my own market research, and everyone I asked watched the station.

### PERKS OF BEING OUTSIDE THE BOX

My ads started running last July, and the results have been excellent. Virtually every day someone comes in and tells us that they never knew about Middle C until they saw our ad, and now they're customers. We get emails from viewers saying that our ad is the only one they don't mute or turn off. And, of course we have it on our website and all of our social media.

We've since made another ad to celebrate our 13th anniversary. That one got such a good response that I tripled my regular plays the week before the event, and needless to say the anniversary party was very successful.

The best unintended consequence of all this is the excitement and energy coming from my staff. They are happy, working together, feeling creative and involved. That's great for them and for the store because a happy staff is an effective staff. So, is there a benefit to thinking outside the box? There sure is. **MI**

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