

THE LESSON ROOM | BY PETE GAMBER

# Growth via Retention

It's Dec. 22. I'm wondering if Christmas is going to pull through, with no clue what to expect in 2009. What if sales drop like a rock? What if the after-Christmas music lesson sign-ups don't happen? This economy is nothing I've dealt with as a business owner in the last 30 years. (And I remember the gasoline lines of the late 1970s.) Consumers will be making tough decisions on where to spend their money. Music lessons will be affected.

Here's my plan: growth through retention. Keeping students (and customers) is always crucial to a healthy business, but now, it's mandatory. If you sold fewer guitars during the holiday shopping season, you're going to have fewer sign-ups. If you have fewer sign-ups and don't retain students, your lesson numbers will drop, meaning less studio rental income and sales. Don't let this spiral out of control. Retention will stabilize your business.



**Keeping students in your lesson program will stabilize your business in an uncertain economy**

## KEEP PARENTS IN THE LOOP

The key to retaining students is to create musicians, not give lessons. This is more than turning the page in a book every week with the student and asking for a check. It means demonstrating to parents (and spouses) that the student is developing both musically and in his or her own life. As people witness someone's musical growth and excitement, they will commit to music lessons. In other words, if lessons are treated as just another activity, deciding to stop them is an easy choice.

Don't assume that parents, in their hectic day-to-day shuffle, will see how their kids are developing musically. Here's where hosting events comes in. Events show the value of music lessons. A few low-cost ideas include a guitar student contest, drum student contest, student blues jam night, songwriting contest, student showcase and jazz night at the store. You can also make a CD of a student playing or e-mail an MP3 of a student

playing during a lesson. Parents will start realizing the value of music lessons once they see their kids onstage or on CD. Even if Johnny lays down a death metal MP3 at his lesson, it shows there's something going on.

## STAY FRONT-OF-MIND

Your lesson program needs to have the we're-here-for-the-student approach to teaching. Go beyond the four walls of the lesson room.

How about starting a weekly student e-mail blast about famous musical

events that happened on that date? Or, you could send out e-mails with news about a particular teacher, a link to YouTube videos on a featured musician, or dates for the high school jazz festival and drum line events. Stay front-of-mind with students and parents. It's easy and really cheap with today's technology.

This also applies to your staff. If employees think students are a pain, they need a crash course in how to be warm and fuzzy. Students and parents want to feel wanted.

So how does growth take place? If you retain students, you retain teachers. The retention creates a referral buzz among parents and students. ("You should have seen my kid at XYZ Music's drum contest." "My kid's teacher e-mails me a song from each lesson. He's awesome.")

People are looking for the best bang-for-their-buck right now. This approach separates you from the check-collector music lesson studios. If parents have to ask you how a student's doing, you need to try some of these ideas, or else your store's going to feel the economy's pinch. If we can create musicians at our stores, we will survive the wild ride of 2009. **MI**

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