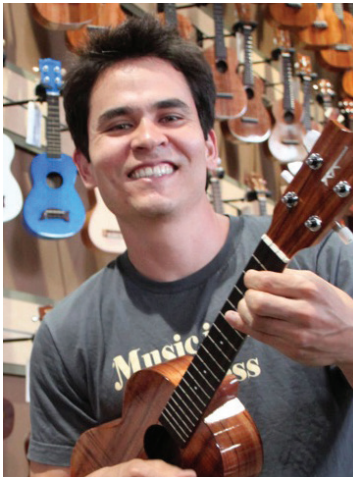


ECONOMIC RHYTHMS | BY PETER DODS

How to Play Host

At my store, Easy Music Center, we strive to create a fun atmosphere for our customers and employees. This atmosphere has been a big draw over the years and has helped us develop quite a following. People visit our store to buy gear, but they also come to jam out and have a good time. This concept has let us triple our sales over the past seven years and expand from one location to a three-store operation.



That said, we've experienced growing pains along the way. Gone are the days of consistent customer flows with enough salespeople to service all customers at all times. More customers have been visiting the store just to hang out or attend a performance or clinic. In other words, customers aren't always here to purchase something, yet we're increasingly encountering large, unpredictable waves of them.

GETTING THE PARTY STARTED

I like to tell my crew that maintaining the right sales floor is a lot like being a party's host family. Before the party starts, the family lines up the drinks, appetizers and music playlist. In a music-store sense, this is the time when the employees arrive for work, but the store isn't open. They get ready for the party by stocking their sections, making sure product is priced and properly merchandised, and doing things that get the store ready for quick, easy customer facilitation.

When guests start trickling in, the host family has time for chatting and face-to-face interaction. This is no different than when the store is slow. I encourage tag teaming with multiple employees to give an outstanding demo or additional insight.

Then, the party starts to get going. There aren't enough family members to tag team anymore, and the host family starts to work the party as individuals. There are still enough family members to have generally meaningful conversations with guests, but there aren't enough hosts to let one guest monopolize too much of anyone's time. In the store, this happens when there are

more customers than salespeople but still enough to cover each customer's needs adequately.

HANDLING A RAGER

Now the party peaks. It's a rager. The time for meaningful conversation is at a minimum, as the host family needs to mingle around as briskly as possible to make sure all guests feel acknowledged. At a busy store, the only way to maintain a modicum of good service is for the sales staff to make sure the immediate needs are being satisfied and to tailor customer expectations with more complicated questions and demos.

Tell them: "It's a little busy right now. Do you mind waiting a bit for things to calm down before we set up this P.A. demo for you? I'd like to make sure you talk with our head audio salesman since he's our most knowledgeable person for P.A. systems." I'm amazed at how understanding customers can be.

There are different service strategies for different customer flows. Salespeople need to ask the right questions, so they can develop long-lasting relationships once the store isn't as busy. On the flip side, they also need to know how to conduct a sale quickly when the party hits its peak, so everyone can party on. **MI**

Peter Dods is the owner of Honolulu-based Easy Music Center.

Think of the sales floor as a party, and you and your staff are the hosts