

INDEPENDENT RETAIL | BY TED ESCHLIMAN

This is Our Moment ...

Who isn't affected by the doom and gloom of current events? Recent economic news and forecasts are mind-numbingly discouraging, for everyone from the rust-belt factory worker appraising the collapse of the American auto industry to the high school graduate fearing the absence of college funding. We all have friends and family threatened by — if not already enduring — unemployment, and we're questioning how our businesses will hold up in this storm.

The silver lining is that our culture — and our customers — will go through a colossal re-evaluation of their priorities. If we have our ducks in a row, we should look at this as an opportunity, not a threat. People under duress will begin reviewing and reassessing what's important. Our industry is about improving lives. It has never been more imperative to rewire it for that commission and to communicate what we do that enhances lives in our communities and among our clients.

Consider this: Do you sell a vintage reissue guitar, or do you sell the vibrant activity of playing that guitar? Do you sell personality karaoke tracks or the occasion to live the life of a favorite singer momentarily? Do you sell a student trumpet or the first step in a young person's musical passage toward a healthy high school social life — and perhaps later a trip to a bowl game with the college marching band? We have to stop thinking about the gear we sell and begin to sell enhanced *lifestyle*. So, I'd like to remind everyone of three important contributions the music trade proffers society.

We sell the value of something that lasts. MP3 players and video games are stimulating and sensational, but how long does the effect last? How long does a typical electronic gadget endure before plunging into obscurity and insignificance? (When was the last time you used

your VCR?) A quality musical instrument can last for decades, let alone provide hours of pleasure. Try trading your Jacuzzi in for another model in eight years versus the equity retained in a wood clarinet. As our culture relearns how to be prudent with money, we will enjoy selling to an enlightened generation that weighs value over frivolous impulse.

We sell pleasure. When people are dispirited, they have two choices: retreat or invest. They can sink into destructive depression, or they can adopt activities that give them a deeper sense of pleasure. A musical activity, be it

committed creation or passive listening, is food for the soul. If we approach our businesses thinking in terms of music's capacity to enhance lives — be it for simple, momentary distraction or for a long-term sense of accomplishment — we assist in warming spirits.

We sell connection. We used to think voicemail was impersonal. Now it seems warm compared to e-mail's cold text. We don't talk to pharmacists for prescriptions, we access a scripted menu. I can't remember the last time I actually talked to a gas-station employee. My debit card is my sole connection to this business. For the last two decades, our high-tech, sterile improvements have left us longing for community. Like sports, music offers us a chance to interrelate but with far fewer physical demands. An 80-year-old fiddler is going to have far more opportunity than an 80-year-old linebacker. The music business offers viable products from cradle to grave.

Don't be lured into the mainstream media's pessimism. We have the obligation and the honor to improve Main Street through our industry, and I believe we can also make a buck along the way. Don't forget: We have something special. This is our moment. **MI**

Ted Eschliman is a 29-year veteran of music retail and co-owner of Dietze Music in Southeast Nebraska. Mel Bay recently published his book, *Getting Into Jazz Mandolin*.



The economic turbulence has a silver lining: the general public will value music making more than ever. Are you prepared?