

# IDEAS



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INDEPENDENT RETAIL | BY TED ESCHLIMAN

## RECLAIMING OUR ROLE

I want to go on record saying that the perceived state of the economy — dismal as it may have been in particular markets — was not our most serious hurdle in 2008. There's a much larger threat to the role of music stores that transcends the temporary up-and-down cycles of employment, prosperity and product category relevance.

During my personal Christmas shopping, it became more apparent than ever that the inventory we once claimed as exclusive to music stores has become ubiquitous. Next to the toothpaste at Walgreens, children's guitars. Next to the linens at Bed Bath & Beyond, starter electric guitar packs. We even have a local interstate truck stop selling vintage guitars. And, of course, there's Best Buy — it has kicked our hiney in portable keyboards for more than a decade.

Fewer and fewer people actually know what a music store is or does. This isn't breaking news. But like the frog that became soup by falling asleep in warming water on the stove, my shopping experience became a call to action.

Understand, the wrong solution is to disown customers that went the non-traditional



### A music store's plan for staying relevant and vibrant in a chain-store world

route on their first instrument purchase. Can you blame someone for wanting the convenience of buying a starter guitar across the aisle from where they purchased their Christmas-present DVD player? Folks *is* busy today.

So my business partners and I recently decided to match up our business plan with our strategy to keep our store relevant in this changing cultural-

commercial climate. Our new mission: *To seek products and promote activities that will recapture our role as a catalyst for music exploration.* Let's break this statement down into its individual components.

**Products.** We are about gear — instruments, equipment and hardware — but we're also about the stuff that makes gear work and, more importantly, the services that perpetuate musical activities. Lessons, repairs and instructional material *en masse*, these are the ties that bind. Relevant accessories — children's chord books, capos and flute case covers — aren't going to be centrally convenient anywhere else but at a music store.

**Promote activities.** As my fellow *Music Inc.* columnist Pete Gamber says, "We have to go out to them. We can't wait for them to come to us." It's the workshops, celebrity gatherings, "meet the manufacturer's rep days" and instrument petting zoos that music stores do best. That's where our marketing and advertising budgets ought to be most deeply invested.

**Recapture our role.** If you've been in the business for more than 20 years, you think music starts in a music store.

Today, you're wrong. The widespread popularity of *Guitar Hero*, "American Idol," Esteban guitars and home shopping channels threaten to diminish us if we aren't diligent.

**Catalyst for music.** We remain the torchbearers for music activity. We have a passion for it. We certainly aren't in the industry for the money — unlike non-traditional MI channels, which are wired only for profit. Clearly, both personal and corporate enthusiasm for the arts need to be visible and contagious. It's this fuel that feeds the fire for the evangelism (and expansion) of the music lifestyle.

**Exploration.** We live in the information age. As the Internet matures, customers don't research, they Google. They aren't "told" anymore, they absorb. We don't sell and explain, we nurture and elucidate. In modern culture's rapid pace, we trade curriculum for discovery. We need to offer opportunities for our customers to find and explore music both inside and outside of our stores. It's time for reclamation. **MI**

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