

INDEPENDENT RETAIL | BY TED ESCHLIMAN

Lights, Camera, Action

Consider a film actor's job stability. He's perpetually unemployed or working a temporary job until contracted to be in that next production. Each project is a new opportunity, but everything before and after, no matter how much he rationalizes "being in between jobs," is basically dressed-up joblessness. He's incessantly waiting for that next opportunity, and when he's fortunate enough to find it, he dives in — only to be unemployed again. The process is designed to make actors maintain connections, assemble a network of potential opportunities to minimize these breaks and enjoy a steady stream of work.

Music retail has gone through exponential changes during the last two decades, and it will continue evolving at this vexing pace. From the advent of mass catalogs in the 1980s to the Internet's world cyber supermarket, we've seen customers go from researching their wants and desires at the local indie to surfing the global commerce stage. We've seen musical tastes morph and shift with new technology and the latest personal recording exchanges (i.e. portable audio and video formats). These have created dizzying transformations in how our customers create and learn music, and we've had to adapt our businesses one wave after another to survive the tsunami.

We're not alone. According to former Secretary of Education Richard Riley, "the top 10 in-demand jobs in 2010 didn't exist in 2004, we are currently preparing students for jobs that don't yet exist, using technologies that haven't been invented, in order to

solve problems we don't even know are problems yet." Why should our industry be immune? The U.S. Department of Labor estimates that today's learner will have 10–14 jobs by age 38. That's a pretty good indication of the upcoming whirlwind of workforce change.

CREATING BLOCKBUSTERS

Each retail transition is much like a movie production when

you get down to it. We assess the script (our inventory), hire the cast and crew (our management and staff), and build the set (out store layout) with the big show in mind. Its quality depends on the caliber of acting, the authenticity of the stage and marketing effectiveness. Commercial success is determined by how well we stick to budget. Sometimes, it's a real blockbuster, and other times, it's a bomb, but the one thing we are assured of is the fragile, perishable nature of allure.

Products run their courses. Accordions were big at one time — so were

iceboxes for refrigeration. Organs took up half our showroom floor, and at one time, ukuleles were only seen in Tiny Tim's and Arthur Godfrey's hands. These days, we can hardly keep ukuleles in-store, and people pay good money to have the organs hauled from their homes. While it can be argued that music making itself is a time-resistant, primal human desire, the tools to participate have evolved throughout eras.

And the instruments aren't all that has changed. Today's distribution channels are radically evolving. When I entered the industry in 1980, I wouldn't have imagined that I'd be competing with a linen store for guitar sales or that flutes would be displayed across from the optical department in a large-format store. I never would've predicted my customers would be able to buy bass strings, at home, in their pajamas at 3 a.m., either.

We can still compete, but we have to look at each year of business as an entirely new show. In the future, we'll be barking some familiar lines (pun intended), but we'll have different costumes and new set designs. If we're good, they'll want our autographs and applaud for more. **MI**

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Music retail is as trendy and transient as the film industry. Do you treat it that way?