

## Time To Rethink Your Store's Lesson Program?

*"Give a person a fish, they eat for a day. Teach a person to fish, they eat for a lifetime."*  
Chinese Proverb

DEBRA PEREZ

**Y**ou might be saying to yourself: "Thanks for the tip, but I run a music store, not a bait and tackle shop".

Fair enough, but apply the philosophy of this well-known proverb to the operation of your store, specifically your lesson program, and you may just find yourself reeling in some more sales.

In essence, this is the belief behind the system Debra Perez promotes when she travels to music stores across North America. "I didn't know any other way," says Perez, who, along with her husband Matt, owns and operates Valley Keyboards in McAllen, TX and The Piano Gallery in Corpus Christi, TX, "I always thought that everyone understood that if people were learning to play music themselves, they would be interested in buying an instrument".

Perez, who holds a graduate degree in piano performance and once taught music at the university level, is now a member of the Music Teachers National Association and has presented at conferences and tradeshows across North America, including MTNA, TMTA, TMEA, RMM, and most recently at NAMM. Boasting such a background, it's no surprise that "music education is the centre hub of everything we do."

Having developed two very successful lesson programs in each store, serving over 600 students, in 2008, Perez was involved with a national NAMM grant that saw her travel to retail stores across the US and help retailers and teachers develop their in-house lesson programs. As Perez explains, that experience made her realize the lesson program developed at her store was very different and unique compared to what was being offered elsewhere. From there, she partnered with composer Will Baily, who holds a PhD in Compositions, and developed the *Musical Moments* and *Way Cool Keyboarding* lesson programs aimed at the recreational music maker.

These programs have since been implemented in more than 45 retail stores and numerous teaching studios across North America. Perez takes an active role in explaining to dealers the philosophy, systems, and strategies that help increase customers, sales, and the store's profile.

### The Philosophy

Perez believes that for a retail store's music lesson program to prove successful, it must be central to the store's operation. "No longer can we just put ads in the paper that say: 'Come to our store! We are having a sale; buy a piano'," she says matter-of-factly. "But what we can do is market to those same people and say, 'Come to our store. We'll show you how to play.'" Perez explains this approach cultivates a relationship and creates future customers. From there, "It just becomes a real natural evolution to where the end result is purchasing [an instrument]."

In addition to focusing your marketing on the lesson program, when a person walks through your doors, Perez believes emphasis on the lesson program should be evident. "Often times, the lessons are in another part of the store," says Perez, alluding to notorious unfinished lesson "rooms" found in the backrooms and basements of countless retail stores.

Situated centrally in her own store is a large 500 sq ft. classroom where group lessons take place. The space is outfitted with large windows all around to offer not only a more open space to learn but an opportunity to attract potential students. "We wanted people that are in the store to see the classes going on."

Another key component to Perez's philosophy is the focus on attracting the recreational music maker. "Music is for everyone," she says, noting that many students who partake in a traditional, formal lesson program often become frustrated and discouraged at the pace and difficulty taken by the lesson's trajectory.



### The Recreational Music Maker

Over the years, Perez has discovered the following to be true about recreational music players.

- Everybody wants to be able to play music. There is an emotional connection to the thought of playing an instrument.
- It is important to honour the courage it takes for a student to sign-up for lessons.
- Students need a stress-free learning environment.
- Students enjoy the social aspects of learning music with others.
- Sincere encouragement will build the student's confidence.
- Students will stop playing when the fun of learning is replaced with high expectations that they cannot achieve. The joy of process is paramount.
- Students are very appreciative of every success they achieve through their musical journey.

For more information on the program, contact Debra Perez: [debraperez@everylifeneedsmusic.com](mailto:debraperez@everylifeneedsmusic.com), [www.everylifeneedsmusic.com](http://www.everylifeneedsmusic.com).

Although Perez understands and values the importance of formal training, the program she promotes is “more about improving people’s lives. Classical training is fine; that’s not what this is.”

Attracting the recreational musician also allows Perez to target adults as well as children, a segment often overlooked by lesson programs. “When I started working with adults 15 years ago, I knew they wanted to play, but just didn’t have a chance,” she says, citing the commitment and difficulty associated with learning from a traditional program. In addition to increasing the amount of potential students, catering to adults also allows classes to be held during the day. “We have daytime adult classes and then at 3:30 p.m., the kids start coming in after school. Then in the evenings, we hold more classes for adults coming in after work.”



Perez teaching an adult class.

## Implementing The System

“You can have a lesson program in your store and not sell any instruments,” says Perez, adding it is very possible to have a complete disconnect with the lessons and the rest of the store.

When Perez consults with a retail store looking to implement or improve a lesson program, she emphasizes the importance of getting everybody on board with the vision and philosophy of the program. “When I work with a store, I work with the sales people, the instructors, and the administration altogether.”

Having all segments of the store’s staff working towards the same goals also helps with securing that sale as a result of the lesson program. “We meet with our salespeople on a regular basis,” says Perez, explaining that she’ll go over the

instrument needs for specific students. “There are certain salespeople assigned to students, helping them along their journey.”

Perez will also offer student specials and discounts on instruments and accessories, even selling the instruments used in the lesson programs. “You want to give people a reason to buy,” she explains.

Following up with the customer base is also very important, according to Perez. “We really started realizing the power of e-mail and what you can accomplish through that.” Collecting e-mail addresses from customers and creating a database allows for targeted communiqués to be sent out. “That’s one of the things at the top of our lists, making sure [customers] get e-mails inviting them to our concerts, letting people know what’s going on every time a new class is forming and starting.” E-mail campaigns are a tried and tested method to attract customers. (Read more about effective e-mailing in *Business Matters* in the December/January 2011 issue of *CMT*.) “Maybe that person doesn’t want lessons, but maybe their aunt does.”



The group classroom at the Piano Gallery.

## Musicians For Life, Customers For Life

A well-implemented lesson program could be exactly what your store needs to boost your bottom line. But as Perez reflects on the initial reasoning for creating the lesson program: “It wasn’t to sell instrument in our store; it was to help people learn to play. The sales came after that.”

You know what they say: Sell a person an instrument, you’ve made a sale. Teach a person to play an instrument, and you’ve made a loyal customer for life.

*Craig Leach is the Assistant Editor of Canadian Music Trade.*

## Promoting The Program

Perez offers the following suggestions on how to raise the profile of your store’s lesson program.

- Have a banner across the building. People will drive by, repeatedly notice the banner, and may come in and ask about the program.
- Get out into the community. Go to the schools, health fairs, and attend local events. It’s a really wonderful message and people are happy to hear it.
- Understand that *everybody* is a potential student, and if not that person, then their father, mother, sister, brother, or friend is.
- Music education is not only about learning to play an instrument; it’s about wellness, health, and improving the quality of life.

