



EDITORIAL

100 YEARS OF PROGRESS

NAMM Celebrates its 100th anniversary this year, and as is illustrated in a history of the association, (beginning on page 122 of this issue) the more things change, the more they remain the same. At the time of its founding in the Hoffman House Hotel in New York City, the association comprised of 52 "reputable" piano merchants. Today, NAMM membership numbers over 7,000 and includes suppliers and retailers selling every conceivable type of music and audio product. The overwhelming majority of the products on display at this year's NAMM show didn't even exist in the imagination of the association's founding members. Yet for all the outward upheaval and the passage of a century, the concerns and complaints of the association membership have remained remarkably constant.

Advancing technology has accomplished great things, but it has yet to surmount the challenge of creating talented employees. Finding, training, and retaining skilled people was at the forefront of the 1902 NAMM Convention agenda where Henry Dreher delivered a keynote address titled "What Constitutes A Good Salesman, And How To Find Them." Nearly a century later, the NAMM show boasts a far more comprehensive series of educational seminars, but, personnel matters continue to be the dominant topic. All of which reinforces the apparently eternal principal that "business would be simple if it weren't for the people."

Another thread running through NAMM history has been the association's role as a platform for retailers to discuss "threats to the industry." At the 1903 convention in Buffalo, a speech titled "The Department Store Ad Writer Wields A Dangerous Power...Nine-Tenths of the Women Fall Victim to His Gilded Words" reflected the widespread industry fear that massive department stores like Macy's were destined wipe out independent piano merchants. A decade later at the Atlantic City Convention, the prospect of competing with Sears was addressed in a speech entitled "The Mail Order Menace." In Anaheim, these concerns are sure to be echoed in a number of sessions dealing with chain store competition and the Internet.

Underlying this century of "threats" are two eternal truths: First, retail is and always will be an intensely

competitive business, a constant struggle for retailers large and small alike to maintain profitability. Second, customer buying patterns shift constantly, forcing retailers to adapt or perish.

Some basic functions at the association have changed noticeably. At the turn of the last century, consumer retailing was still in its infancy and the buying public was extremely naive by contemporary standards. In this climate, flagrantly dishonest retailers could thrive, misrepresenting brand names, overcharging, and making outlandish claims. Typical of the era, 1901 saw one of Chicago's leading piano dealers jailed after he used forged bills of lading to convince customers that a \$165 piano was actually a \$400 piano. A subsequent torrent of newspaper exposes across the country portraying music dealers as swindlers prompted NAMM to attempt to enforce a code of business practices on its membership. In a 1909 article in *Music Trades*, NAMM President C.A. Grinnell called for honest business practices, declaring, "We must recapture our good reputation or face terrible consequences." The buying public remains somewhat skeptical about retailers in every industry, but better consumer laws, competitive pressures, and improved retail practices have successfully pushed business ethics off the NAMM agenda.

The best news to be gleaned from NAMM's illustrious history is the industry's relentless progress. It hasn't always followed a linear course, due to obstacles like war and economic dislocation, but it has never faltered. Some businesses have unfortunately been left by the wayside, but on balance, the industry has steadily grown larger and more prosperous with each passing decade. The technological, economic, and demographic forces that spurred industry growth over in the '90s were undreamed of in the '70s. While we can only guess at what will emerge in the future to take the industry to an even higher plane, it's a safe bet that some transformative development is in the works as we attend the 2001 trade show.

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