

Eternal Truths And Passing Crises

“**T**his is the year of the hard sell. All field reports indicate that music retailers are feeling a softness in sales.” No, this quote wasn’t culled from yesterday’s newspaper, although it could have been. It was delivered exactly 50 years ago by then NAMM chief Bill Gard as he addressed the industry at the annual Chicago trade show. Trying to encourage retailers facing a sluggish economy, he declared, “Where there has been aggressive selling, there has been no slump. No longer can a retailer wait for business to come to him; today he has to roll up his sleeves, get out of the store, and go after it.”

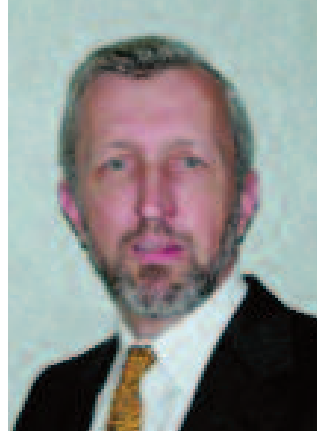
Despite the sweeping societal change that has transpired over the past five decades, Gard’s comments are eerily relevant today. Just as in 1958, retailers today who hope to survive, let alone prosper, have no choice but to get out of the store and aggressively promote. Waiting for walk-in traffic is a sure prescription for untimely extinction.

No segment of the industry currently faces more external challenges than the piano industry. Tighter credit markets, slumping housing values, and anxious consumers all make it harder to move big-ticket grand pianos. Despite these obstacles, however, piano retailers profiled elsewhere in this issue prove that, as Bill Gard observed, “where there has been aggressive selling, there has been no slump.”

Aggressive selling can take many forms. For some retailers, it entails a heavy commitment to education for both children and adults. As Matt and Debra Perez of Valley Keyboards observe, “Successful music retailing starts with creating music makers.” For others, it involves concerted community outreach. Bob Baker of Baker’s Piano Center in Colorado notes, “Discount advertising doesn’t work. You sell pianos by building relationships. It’s nothing new, but it works.” For the Saphir family in Chicago, it means marshalling a superlative service effort behind a relatively narrow range of products. The common element in these disparate approaches is 12 months of meticulous planning, unflagging enthusiasm, and diligent customer follow-up.

The retailers we profile are not “Pollyannas” with an unrealistic world view. They simply expend their energy on issues they can control—like attracting new students, tapping past customers for referrals, or cultivating local music teachers—instead of fretting about macroeconomic issues they can’t alter. Their sales performance is potent testimony to the effectiveness of this approach.

It’s important to highlight success stories in the face of a difficult operating climate, particularly given the daily tor-



rent of grim economic news. In the crime-ridden ’80s, the guiding editorial principle of New York’s local television news was, “if it bleeds, it leads.” Today’s networks and cable news, not to mention email blasts and cell phone updates, seem to take a similar approach to the economy, focusing on the grisly stories to the exclusion of all else.

In 1958, Americans were in a decidedly sour mood. National pride had taken a serious blow after the Soviet Union beat us into space with the launching of Sputnik. President Eisenhower faced withering criticism after an army bomber had accidentally dropped an unarmed atom bomb in South Carolina. (It didn’t go off.) The decision to dispatch 10,000 marines to defend Lebanon amidst escalating violence in the Middle East was greeted with a combination of fear and dread. On the economic front, unemployment topped 6% and bellwethers Ford and General Motors, not to mention the U.S. piano industry, posted sharp earnings declines.

These former world-threatening “crises” probably aren’t even notable enough today to warrant a passing mention on an episode of *Jeopardy*. Yet five decades ago the companies that kept focused and, in Bill Gard’s words, “rolled up their sleeves,” found a way to prosper in challenging times. Today’s headlines are quickly destined to be tomorrow’s obscure footnotes. However, as our profiled retailers illustrate, a hard-charging sales effort is still the way to build lasting success.

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