
The Forgotten Customer

Stop for a second and put yourself in the shoes of an individual who may be representative of a large potential market. Consider the following scenario: You're about 40 years old and have established yourself in a reasonably well paying career. When you were a kid, you took piano lessons, and in high school, later you played a Farfisa combo organ in a band that covered Beatle tunes. Somehow or another, when you went to college you got involved in other things and your music slipped away. Lately, though, you've read some articles about "the new generation of electronic musical instruments," in publications like *Time*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *Rolling Stone*, and *Esquire*, and you're intrigued about the possibility of getting back to music. The money is no problem; you just don't know where to start.

You decide to check out a few music stores. First, you walk into the local M.I. store and tell the salesman that you're interested in some type of keyboard system, but you really don't know what's available. With machine-gun speed, he shoots back, "This 300 SE is the best thing on the market, it's 16 voice polyphonic, has 128 presets, RAM for another 128 presets, full MIDI implementation, a polyphonic after-touch keyboard, and we're having a special, so if you buy it today, you can save another 15%." You're completely confused but don't want to look like an idiot, so you say you'll think it over and you quietly retreat.

Undaunted, you keep on going and pay a visit to the local piano and organ dealer. You tell the salesman that you're interested setting up some type of electronic music system, and he shows you a \$20,000 console organ and a baby grand piano. You visit a few more stores with the same frustrating results. After a day of this, you conclude that this "new generation of electronic musical instruments" simply doesn't exist, and your thoughts of returning to music gradually fade away.

Conversations with retailers and manufacturers reveal that there is a growing number of hobbyists who are interested in synthesizers and related MIDI products. Unfortunately, the industry's distribution system has yet to respond to them. M.I. stores are

generally not well equipped to deal with the uninitiated, and most piano and organ dealers are oblivious to the new technology.

From an historic standpoint, the current state of affairs is hardly surprising. Generally speaking, it takes a while for the distribution system to catch up to new products. Trumpets and clarinets were in existence long before retailers refined the process of selling them to public schools. The guitar predated the highly effective guitar studio operations of the '60s. And it took several years before home organ dealers realized that in-store teaching programs greatly facilitated sales.

The synthesizer has been with us since the mid-sixties; however, early instruments were so expensive, limited, and difficult to use that it was out of the question to consider selling them to anyone other than the dedicated professional. Today's synthesizer, with its presets, portability, and low cost, has a much broader based appeal. The remaining question is how to translate product appeal into more sales.

Do we have a solution to the problem? Unfortunately, no, but we sense a great commercial opportunity for those dealers who can present hi-tech products to the general public in a "user-friendly" manner. This is not a small niche market, either. Potentially, hobbyists could be bigger than everything else put together. First, they are more numerous than pro and semi-pro musicians; secondly, they have more money to spend.

Take some time to assess your sales presentation and product mix. Are your salespeople intimidating potential customers with a barrage of technical jargon? Is your store an unappealing visual mess that would deter all but the most determined professionals? How about your inventory mix: Does your store have the appearance of a mausoleum?

There is no pat formula for reaching this group of "baby boom" hobbyists, but for those dealers who can creatively present the benefits of the latest digital products and simultaneously educate their customers, there is a tremendous opportunity.

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