

The Last Dinosaur



By Jeff Mazza,
Royal Music

Ibegan my career delivering Lowrey organs in the summer of 1984. From the day I started I was told, "You missed it." Industry data shows I missed the hey-day of the organ business by about five years. Being a delivery guy was a good entry into the music business. It paid better than the burger-flipping minimum wage jobs many of my classmates were getting that summer. As I transitioned into a commissioned sales position I learned that sales could be both a noble and profitable profession.

Organ sales had begun their decline before I joined the industry, but during my early years in sales it was still possible to earn very good money selling organs. More importantly the skill set necessary to become good in the market segment prepared our salespeople to excel in sales of any other product and/or service. One of our rookie salesmen went on to become one of the top pager salesmen in the country after just one year of sales training in the music business. Twenty years ago a majority of executives in our industry had organ selling experience listed on their resumes.

As the years have passed and most of the manufacturers of home organs have either closed, been sold, or changed directions, there has remained a small (shrinking) group of dealers who continue to promote and sell these instruments. I can't count the number of times someone has remarked to me, "You're still selling those things!"

Over the last five years I have represented both Lowrey and Roland Atelier organs. When I went in business in 1993 there were four organ stores in my town. Now I'm basically the last organ store in New Jersey. Twenty years ago it would have been impossible to represent the top two brands. Today there is such little demand that Roland has joined the list of "used to" manufacturers: "We used to build organs."

There is much to be learned from organ salespeople. The following concepts are critical for all



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marketers of musical instruments.

In our country there are more people who don't play music than those who do. Everyone involved in our industry is best served by growing the market. Making more musicians makes more potential customers. In all segments of the music products business there is a simple formula that states. Students X Inventory = SALES ... or as I teach my staff P X P = P... Product X People = Profit.

It's okay to earn a profit. The margins on home organs were strong enough at both the wholesale and retail level to ensure the longevity of the companies involved in marketing these products. The introduction of MAP and the race to sell at shrinking margins has done a terrible disservice to our industry.

As an industry we need to teach people how to operate and grow our businesses. As a rookie I learned not only from the people who owned and managed the company I worked for, but also from a cadre of industry professionals who taught me the industry could afford me a decent living and more fun than I could imagine. Over the last fifteen years the relationship between manufacturers and retailers has changed dramatically and as the dinosaur I profess to be, I'll say it has not changed for the better.

I was first published in *MMR Magazine* in November 2000. My guest editorial: 'Home Organ Retail and the \$64,000 Question' was a call for everyone involved in selling home organs at both the retail and wholesale level to step up their game.

Fifteen years later as one of the last organ salesmen, I feel like the last dinosaur with his foot stuck in the tar pit. (If anyone wants to read that article e-mail me and I'll send it to you: jeffmazza@royalmusic.com).

I was moved to write that article because I thought my niche of the music products industry was at a crossroads. It was, and as an industry segment we didn't follow the best course.

The music business is very simple:

- Teach someone to play.
- Let them try nice instruments.
- Encourage them both to play and to purchase.
- Understand the lifetime value of this customer.
- Don't do anything stupid to make them leave you or the hobby of making music.

In my November 2000 article I posed the question, "What constitutes an organ sale?" At the time I hypothesized... "It may be time for us as an industry niche to reclassify product categories by marketing method. From NAMM we can follow trends of product categories and unit sales. Yet we cannot track to whom these instruments were sold. If a dealer markets a digital ensemble to an over 60-year-old consumer and includes a comprehensive class lesson package with purchase, that seems like an organ sale to me. If organ retailers don't view that as an organ sale they certainly should view it as competition."

The trend line for home organ sales over the last 20 years is abysmal. However, the demographics show an unprecedented

upside potential for those who want to market home hobbyist musicians. Any manufacturer of a keyboard product with auto accompaniment features is essentially in the home organ business on some level and needs to understand the dynamics involved in selling their products through various marketing channels.

At 2,800 words my last article was an industry warning that went ignored. After thirty years on the retail sales floor and having earned every dollar through the sale of electronic keyboard instruments (organs, digital pianos and portable keyboards) I have decided to form an industry think tank in hopes of shaping the marketing strategies of those involved in the sales of the aforementioned keyboards. I envision a three-tiered group with a tier for senior management of manufacturers and perhaps dealer principles, another tier for manufacturer's reps, and finally a group for retail salespeople. My experience shows as an industry we are losing high quality potential people to other, more lucrative, less stagnant industries. The industry as a whole must grow to attract and retain its talent. This think tank could be the impetus of that growth.

It has been said, "If you're not getting better, you're getting worse." Frustrated by the lack of growth in our industry, I want to meet with other industry thought leaders and plot a course for growth.

Anyone interested in participating in this think-tank may e-mail me jeffmazza@royalmusic.com or call my store (732) 240-2332. I intend to host the inaugural meeting this winter. **MMA**

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