Lessons from the Music Man, Prof. Harold Hill

by: William W. Gourley

Professor Harold Hill of Music Man fame may not have been able to find middle C on the piano but he certainly offers great insight into the business side of the music education world. Let’s not fool ourselves, music to the educator or the performer may be all about artistic expression, but to get people in the seats they need to be sold, whether they are in the school music classroom, the concert hall or supporters of music.

Few of us who are involved in music performance were inherently drawn to it. We had to be sold on music. It may have been hearing the *1812 Overture* at an outdoor concert, a precision university marching band playing the *Stars and Stripes Forever*, or attending a performance of *Cats*.

**Recruiting**

Professor Hill knew how to recruit. Of course, his livelihood depended on it so he made sure he left no stone unturned and had a strategy that produced numbers. The Music Man was a salesman after all and he knew how to identify his market and make the product more appealing. Marketers know they need to create a positive image for the product in the consumer’s mind.

- **Recruit a Star First**
  One of the most effective strategies is to associate celebrities with a product. Prof. Hill recruited the leader in the school, Tommy Djilas, to lead the River City Boys Band. Identify the students who are the leaders in each classroom and fit them to an instrument first. Then let their popularity enhance the band’s or orchestra’s image. This can also be an effective tool to enhance instrumentation. If you can get a few of those leaders to play trombone, French horn, viola or cello you will build interest in playing these instruments.

  This will take a little homework on your part.
  - Ask the elementary teachers or general music teacher who the leaders are.
  - Identify those class leaders who may have older brothers or sisters in the band or orchestra.
  - Check with your high school students to see if any of them may have been a babysitter or had any other relationship (scouts, clubs, religious organizations, coached sports teams, etc.) with these students.

- **Get the General Music Teacher To Help**
  Prof. Hill knew how important it was to enlist the support of the only music teacher in River City piano teacher and librarian, Marian Paroo, in his efforts to recruit students for his band. Unlike the Music Man, you do not need the general music teacher to fall in love with you but you do need to have him/her like you. After all, you both are trying to get young people excited about music.
General music teachers can be a great resource in marketing the band and orchestra program. In the months leading up to signing up for your program they can introduce students to the various instruments and the benefits of playing music. Ask your general music teacher if there is anything you could do to help them promote your program.

- Provide high school students who can visit the general music classes to demonstrate their instrument.
- Offer a Petting Zoo (instruments students can hold and play) for the class and Zoo Keepers (high school students who can help students get a sound on an instrument). You may be able to present one of these in conjunction with an elementary music concert, open house or parent teacher conference. You can make this a lot of fun if you get t-shirts for the Zoo Keepers and offer a certificate or badge to the students trying out instruments saying they have “tamed” the clarinet, trumpet, whichever instrument(s) on which they did well.
- Provide a recruiting video to show in the general music class.
- Provide recruiting posters to be displayed in the general music classroom.

- Enhance Parent Awareness

Our good professor knew the importance of proclaiming the benefits of being in the band and he made sure the parents were well informed as to how to avoid their children succumbing to the degradations that accompanied idle hands and playing… pool. Yes, my friends, Prof. Hill researched the town to find out what worried the good citizens of River City. The pool hall of River City in the late 1800’s has been replaced with drug abuse, self discipline, self esteem, team work, creativity and helping our children succeed in a competitive world to name a few.

- Fill school newsletters and local newspapers with articles and pictures of the ensembles engaged in performances and other activities. Superintendents and principals are always asking for material to fill their newsletters and they love to feature students having a good time in the classroom or participating in solo and ensemble or concert performances.
- Have small ensembles performing at every elementary and middle school activity parents attend. A small percentage of elementary parents attend football or basketball games but many more turn out for parent teacher conferences, school plays and elementary music concerts.
- Create a series of mailings to completely inform parents of the process their children will be going through this year to join band. This should include at least four mailings.
  - One general letter with a brief overview of the recruiting procedure, pertinent dates and any music aptitude testing.
  - A second letter just before visiting the classrooms reminding parents of the dates students will be trying out instruments and the informational/rental meeting date.
  - A third fitting letter that can be sent home with the student telling the parent what instrument(s) the child selected with a reminder of the information/rental meeting date.
- A follow-up letter after the rental night informing the parents how they can still get their child in the band or orchestra program if they missed the information/rental meeting.

**Community Support**

Mayor Shinn was skeptical of Prof. Hill’s credibility and justifiably so. Unlike Harold Hill, our motives for teaching music aren’t to make a quick buck off the locals and move on but too often music’s viability and value are called into question, especially in challenging economic times.

- **Involve the Administration**
  As you will recall, Mayor Shinn asked the school board to investigate Hill’s credentials. Today, with the well intended increased emphasis on the sciences, math, literacy and other vital classes, music is finding itself squeezed into a smaller part of the curriculum and fighting for its survival. Administrators and school boards are investigating music’s credentials and sustainability.

Prof. Hill guided the school board members toward an appreciation of the benefits of music by getting them singing. Okay, it is doubtful you will be able to pull out a pitch pipe at the next board meeting when budget cuts come up and get them to sing, *Light a Rose*, but you can foster a greater appreciation for the value of the band or orchestra program in other ways.

  o **The guest soloist.** Invite members of the board or administration to play triangle, bass drum, cymbals, mallets, anything on a selection in the concert. You can have one of the students coach the board member as to when to play. If you are fortunate enough to have a board member who used to play or still plays, feature them on a concert. Even if they can only play *Hot Cross Buns* on the viola get them to play at the elementary concert (even if it is a band concert). Administrators and school boards are always impressed by lots of happy parents and community members watching students doing well and they get a chance to witness the excitement and benefits students derive from your program.

  o **Guest announcer or narrator.** If you can’t convince a school board member or administrator to play an instrument you may be able to get them to emcee your concert or be a narrator.

  o **Dedicate a concert to the school board and administrators with an educational theme.**

  o **Have a small student ensemble (trio, quartet, quintet) perform at a board meeting.**

- **Community Involvement**

Such a small percentage of most communities have children in school and of those only 2-10% of K-12 parents may have children in your program. It is vital to a vibrant music program to have broad based community support. One day younger parents will have the opportunity to encourage their child to join the band or orchestra and older people in the community will need reason to support the music program in times of budget cuts and general allocation of dollars.
o Be a part of major community events. Memorial Day, Fourth of July celebrations and local fairs are a great opportunity to enhance the program’s value to the community. You don’t need to have the entire ensemble at these events. A small group sitting on a float with some amplification can do the job.

o Schedule regular (monthly or quarterly) performances for small ensembles at senior citizen communities, and community service organizations’ meetings (Kiwanis, Optimist, etc.)

o Put your performances on the web and local cable TV.

o Invite government officials and community leaders to be a part of your concerts as soloists, emcee/narrators, or honorees. If you can get a writer or editor from the local newspaper to be involved in a concert you may improve your chance to get greater coverage in the paper throughout the year.

Retention
Harold Hill may not have had a degree in music education but he knew how to keep his customer happy. To stay out of jail the professor had to show a product right away. He knew that if those students didn’t play something he was going to spend time as a long term guest of the River City Jail. Since he was a salesman not an educator he counted on his expertise as a salesman. He knew that if whatever the children played sounded remotely like a melody he was a free man. All educators need a little salesman in them to get students to buy into what they are teaching.

• The Think System. When the next few years of your life comes down to spending time in jail or going free you become very creative. Prof. Hill knew that children wanted to play music. That’s why they joined the band, not to learn theory, and the parents wanted to hear music. To our ears that, Minuet in G, rendition was nothing but a bunch of honks and squeeks but to those River City parents hearing their Johnny play for the first time, it was 76 Trombones.

Harold Hill was actually getting students off to a great start. By putting the lesson book aside in the beginning and teaching simple melodies to his students he was focusing on ear training, pulse and music making first. What creates more excitement, coming home and showing your parents what a whole note and time signature is or playing Hot Cross Buns, squeeks and all, for them?

Your students and parents, like those River City folks, don’t want to wait a month for that first song or months for the first concert. They are looking for results from their investment of time and money, and if they don’t get it they will leave the program.

o Rote teach songs and the first few pages of the method book for the first month.
  • Show fingerings and tell them the corresponding note name
  • Demonstrate how to play the song or exercise (model)
  • Use a rhythmic-harmonic accompaniment to reinforce pulse awareness
- Emphasize proper posture, hand position and embouchure/bow hold
- Have your older students assist
  - Present a short (20 minute) informal demonstration concert within the first six weeks
    - Print a nice program with the students’ names
    - Present a first concert certificate at the concert
    - Serve ice cream or dessert
    - Four to five tunes eight measures long
    - Use a rhythmic-harmonic accompaniment
    - Invite one or two older students to play along with the group to help hold things together

As music educators it may be difficult to understand how any child would not like to play an instrument or how any parent would not want their child to experience the benefits of music. To be a successful salesman Professor Harold Hill knew it was vital to understand why someone would not buy his product and devise a marketing strategy to create the demand for it. In the end, the good professor did learn to become a good teacher. It will benefit music education if we can learn from Harold Hill and become better salesman.