

Developing and Maintaining a Successful Private Music Studio, or How to Buy that Refrigerator in 15 lessons or less...guaranteed!

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Getting started: Opening your studio-Be patient, it takes time to establish a private studio. How does one rate a private studio as “successful?” This is subjective. There are many layers of success.

How to attract students

- Have a web presence. Currently very important. Several free web development pages are available. Once generated, a web hosting service is needed, but these are reasonably priced and fees are probably tax-deductible. Email has become a primary source of student/teacher contact.
- Design and freely distribute effective business cards.
- Offer convenience--Driving to homes, becoming “The itinerate teacher.”
- Be flexible with scheduling. Starting lessons at 5/10/15/20 minutes past the hour to meet school dismissal schedules might be appreciated and productive.
- Advertising-print media—newspapers, magazines, flyers.
- Books and reference materials *(see references at the end of this hand-out) The ideas contained in the articles and books can be very helpful.
- Notify churches, schools, service clubs. Distribute flyers at libraries, health clubs, supermarkets.
- Very productive source: current students referring to you by word-of-mouth. Ask your current students to help: “I have several openings in my teaching schedule and would appreciate your referrals. I’d love to work with other excellent students/families like yours.”
- Give performances in the geographic region(by either yourself, or your students).
- Affiliate with associations. Public perception of membership in a professional organization elevates your position: MTNA, other national and state assns.
- Contact realtors, welcome-wagon groups, large corporations, relocation services.
- Introduce yourself to college faculty at nearby campuses.
- Have adequate equipment in the studio (instruments, computers, books, a/v.
- Offer budget-friendly group lessons, then transition more promising students into private lessons.
- Promotional perks: gifts, receptions, parties, open houses. Include a social aspect.
- Establish a relationship with music-related stores in your area-they can sometimes provide a recital venue, and referrals
- Your public performances and those of your students or successes of your students should be announced in press releases sent to all media outlets
- Working as administrator or being involved in various performing arts organizations in your region: Choirs, orchestras, theatre groups. Many have youth, semi or fully professional levels.
- Generate a studio newsletter monthly or several times per year. Mention your work and the accomplishments of your students. Publish names.

The studio policy and procedures document

- Helps to establish and maintain a business-like environment. Can be generated in various formats: Glossary, Single-page, web page.
- Power of the studio policy-real or perceived...puts you in control.

- Read your policy...verbatim...during the audition. This will avoid future misunderstandings. Send one prior to your initial meeting.
- Provide reminder copies to current students. Suggestion: at least 2X per year
- Can be attached to a studio newsletter or other electronic communication

Teachable moments...there will be many, to parents especially because...

- Most are inexperienced (common) and don't know what to ask or say.
- They ask questions or request things that can be deemed inappropriate:
 1. When the first questions is: "What do you charge?"
 2. How many students do you have? ("A thousand.")
 3. Asking for exceptions to the studio policy.

Dealing with the unknown and the unknowing-

- Be repetitive and consistent when dealing with all members of the studio.
- Fairness should be emphasized, especially to those asking for special favors.
- Refer to the studio policy: i.e. "as stated in the studio policy..."
- Giving scholarships or special reduced rates—you will be asked, be prepared to respond. You decide...but...Who gets them? The most in need? The hardest workers? The most talented? When you have an opening in your schedule?

Your personality-- high on the priority list—quite important for attracting & retaining students

- During the first contact: Phone, email, text: be nice, gracious, respectful.
- During interviews, auditions, lessons, examinations and competitions.
- Properly prepare students and their parents when participating in competitive events. (most times there is only one winner, and the rest....are not. This can be difficult for all.)
- Reputation. Are you valued and respected by your colleagues? Why do you respect certain colleagues? What is it they do that gives them that honor? Emulate that.

Obtaining, then maintaining your "wealth"

- Offer lessons at a fair rate, and schedule regular rate increases: Once per year...every other year ...make it a habit! This can become an expected action which can be mentioned in your studio policy. A tough economy can put a damper on your plans, but even so other things continue to increase in price, so don't be too hesitant to raise. Possible rubric: Annual cost-of-living percentage increase. Sometimes this is not much, but it still helps. Remember that you aren't just working during the lesson. You have strategized, selected, and probably purchased music; filled out endless application forms; put together a schedule (which can be VERY challenging), practiced concerto accompaniments, answered emails and phone calls on many questions and concerns, wrote letters of recommendation...as well as many other related activities.
- Billing. Choose a preferred payment frequency: by the lesson, the month, the semester or a custom term. Accept credit cards. Banks offer free automatic payments. Strongly suggest your payment preference at the interview. Hire an assistant to bill or collect. It takes you out of the line-of-fire if a glitch turns up. It adds a professional element. Hire a local college student, a relative, or use a temp service agency. There are many possibilities to fulfill this task.
- Consult rate surveys, if available, to find out the general spectrum of lesson rates in your area. Some local associations do this occasionally. They are helpful. You might suggest this at your next teachers' meeting, or make some calls to other teachers in your area and ask. Don't obsess

over what your colleagues are charging, simply use the rate/fee knowledge to gauge your own fee structure. If we compare fees of music lessons with other fields: tennis lessons, horseback riding, ice-skating, ballet...we would be surprised to see how low our lesson rates actually are.

- Offer to play at “casuals” like weddings, funerals, dinner parties. These can pay well...will add to your income and they can be an excellent recruiting tool.
- Shop for benefits: health, long-term care, disability. National Health Care Act, Costco/Sam’s Club for healthcare insurance plans that individuals may find attractive. Check for availability.
- Reduce studio attrition by presenting well-prepared students in public performances & carefully choose the repertoire they play. Successful performances are a great point of exposure for a teacher. After all, our students are our “billboards.”
- You should earn then require loyalty and trust. There is a limited number of students that we can accept. Our schedules are limited, especially since most students are in school until 2 or 3 pm. Your clients need to like you, want what you offer, and they must value your time and expertise. Tell them this when they ask for exceptions to your rules. Unlike other professions like a dentist, physician or attorney who may have 100’s of patients/clients that can be called to take an open spot caused by a cancellation...we are limited. The client (student) is purchasing a lesson time slot in your valuable and limited schedule.
- Loyalty from your students can be determined in many ways: do they attend your performances? Do they attend recitals given by other students in your studio? Do they thank you for the lesson? Do they question assigned repertoire? Do they volunteer when you need help with a specific task, studio performance, reception refreshments? Are they flexible when you offer a make-up? Are they unreasonable when you need to change a lesson time?
- Be sure to mention outstanding service by a student or parent in your studio newsletter.
- A wide-spectrum of student demographics can be served: some simply love music, others want a more directed approach and want to earn success in competitive or evaluation programs to enhance their resumes. We can manage to support all of these needs. A studio can be focused.
- Transitioning students from one studio to another...for any reason: To or from a teacher specializing in a particular area: beginning or advanced students, adults, special needs, etc. The referral element is a two-way street and can pay off handsomely. Honesty and ethical behavior should be encouraged by all involved. Teachers should remember that the student will eventually grow-up and leave, but your colleagues remain.
- The lesson duration: advantages and disadvantages of the 30, 45, 60 minute slots. Artistic, financial, studio population, age, attention span are all considerations. Longer lessons mean less students, and a higher percentage hit if students graduate or from normal attrition.
- Keep good accounting records. Bank deposits. Consider a separate business account for your studio. Keep registration lists from your studio for student evaluations, festivals, etc.

Incorporation or use of the IRS form 1040 (common IRS form for the self-employed)

Most individuals in “high-income” professions are usually incorporated. Attorneys and physicians, e.g. Incorporated businesses accrue higher accounting fees, but since nearly everything is deductible it still might be advantageous. Analyze your situation with an accountant.

- Other tax issues: the in-home studio. Deductions related to business. Instruments, upkeep.
- Find and use an accountant comfortable with the home-based business rules in the IRS code.

- Use accounting software to keep things in order, or be sure to periodically file receipts and invoices so that things will be in order when the time comes to file.

Local city and home association codes/enforcement and the malcontent parent or neighbor

- Your neighbors & government regulations. Best to know before you buy or sign a lease.
- Mitigating challenges...it only takes one person. Prevention: Be considerate.
- One easy way to calm things down when a discussion turns challenging, is to ask the adversary: “What would you like me to do that would solve this issue in a fair way?” By the answer, one can determine if a reasonable solution can be reached. Homeowner codes can be tricky, but in-studio issues are ultimately determined by you. After all, it is YOUR studio.
- There are times when cutting ties with even the most talented student, is best for your health and well-being, but hopefully this would be an infrequent action.

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