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# RETAIL

GUITAR STOP | BY MARTHA SPIZZIRI

## GUITAR STOP KEEPS GOING

Guitar Stop just celebrated its 50th year of selling guitars — but it almost didn't become a music store at all. Founder Edward Oster, father of current owner Jeanne Oster, had a driving school, then started selling insurance, and eventually switched to selling used office equipment. One day in 1962, someone brought an Aria guitar into the store and Edward bought it on a whim. Soon, used musical instruments became a significant part of the business. "He was referred to as 'Fast Eddie,' because the deals were so fast," Jeanne Oster said. "Somebody would come in and sell you a guitar, and before the guy even left the store, somebody else was handing you twice as much money to take it away."

Edward died in 1986, and Jeanne, who had worked in the store almost continuously from the age of 10, took over the operation. In 1987, she moved the shop to a more affluent area and started selling mostly new guitars. The store's diminutive size forced her to edit inventory carefully. Today, the 500-square-foot shop in Cambridge, Mass., carries a narrow selection of brands, including Squier, Fender, Ibanez, Gretsch, Guild and Takamine, most priced under \$1,000. Oster



Edward Oster in the early days of the shop; inset: Guitar Stop today.

also recently started selling ukuleles and nylon-string Cordoba classical guitars.

### SMART LESSONS

The operation strives to provide any service a guitarist might want, including repair work, and has a strong print music business. "It definitely brings people in," Oster said. But in recent years, the store's lessons program has become a focus. "We could almost survive on lessons alone,

which is nice," said Oster, who estimated lessons now represent 40 percent of the store's gross income. Five teachers, who are independent contractors, use small rooms downstairs from the retail space. Guitar Stop offers private lessons, workshops and group classes, including regularly scheduled "Kid's Jams" for ages 9–15. (Lessons cost \$22.50 for a half-hour and \$45 for an hour; the group jams cost \$240 for eight one-hour sessions.)

"[The lesson program] takes so much pressure off the sales," Oster said. "If I sell a music lesson, I pay the teacher a percentage, I get a percentage. I don't have to replace anything." And customers

who come in for lessons might need strings, a setup or a new instrument. Accessories represent about 20 percent of gross sales, according to Oster.

The classes enjoy a built-in clientele since the store caters primarily to beginners and intermediate players. And because the shop is only a few miles from the prestigious Berklee School of Music, Oster and her sister, Joanne, who runs the lesson program, can recruit teachers from the school. That's probably the biggest factor in the success of the program. "The students really like the teachers," Oster said. "Of course, if you don't have a good teacher, it doesn't really matter about anything else."

Though there's competition from Berklee students who give private lessons, Oster said that issue is offset both by the fact that Berklee is a source of teachers for the store, and by the shop's stringent requirements for its instructors.

"For us to even interview

a teacher, they have to have a degree in music," she said. "They have to have five years' minimum experience teaching in a structured situation. They can't just say, 'Oh, I taught somebody in my basement.' And they have to be playing professionally."

The lessons program receives numerous word-of-mouth referrals due to the quality of the instruction and thrives, in part, because students don't have to make a big financial outlay.

"The only commitment the student has is a security deposit of one lesson," Oster said. "We have one day's cancellation notice, or they have to pay for the time reserved. They pay for each lesson as they take it. They're only committing to one lesson at a time, although the majority of our students do take [lessons] for quite a long time." Students who prepay for a 12-lesson "pack" get a 10-percent discount.

**ONLINE EVOLUTION**

Online fliers, Oster often highlights the instructors' resumes, and she promotes the lessons mostly through her website and social media. The company first launched its site in 1996, an early entry that Oster said keeps the store high up in Google searches. The fact that the Guitar Stop site has more than 500 pages doesn't hurt search-engine rankings either. "We change the site daily if something comes in," she said. "If something goes out, we update it." Oster doesn't take search-engine rankings for granted, and makes sure the site incorporates strong keywords, a title for each page, a site map and other characteristics that keep the shop near the top.

Oster says she's able to price her merchandise competitively with other online vendors, though she's felt the bite of Amazon, especially in replacement parts such as pickups, pots, screws and pickguards. Shops selling on Amazon now come up ahead of Guitar Stop in web searches for those items. Oster opts not to sell on the site. "Before [Amazon began selling music gear] we were shipping out 30 percent of our monthly gross," Oster said. "And now we're shipping out, maybe, 2 percent." But she added that her gross annual income increases every year, and she attributed that growth partly to the Web. "People are finding my site and my gear on the net, but

they're coming in to buy it," she explained.

In the end, Oster attributes her success not so much to any one specific action, but to constant vigilance toward what's going on — changing technology, shifts in the marketplace and evolving customer demands. It's a philosophy she learned from her father, who morphed his business from a driving school to an insurance agency

and then again, to a used-equipment store. "He was a great businessman, because he saw opportunities and took advantage of them," said Oster. "There are lots of people who don't see the opportunities, and then there are people who see the opportunities but don't do anything about it. The great business people are the ones who see the opportunities and act on them." **MI**

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