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# RETAIL

THE PIANO STORE | BY MARTHA SPIZZIRI

## A ROOM OF HIS OWN

**B**en Nieves started selling pianos by accident. He was a frequent visitor to The Music Exchange, a piano store near his hometown of Auburn, Calif., and eventually found himself answering other patrons' questions. Pretty soon, the manager noticed and hired him.

He worked at Music Exchange for nearly a decade and then at Sherman Clay for about three years. Toward the end of his time there, he started thinking about opening a store with a partner. He left the industry for six months, and worked at a bank — but all the while he continued to ponder what it would take to open a shop of his own. After a piano technician mentioned the Hailun line to him, the name kept reappearing in his research. "I said, if I could make a piano the way I wanted to, I would do German materials, built in China, Japanese machinery, with good Renner action," he said. "And that's what Hailun does."

He found that the company was willing to work with him on financing, and provided plenty of support, even supplying statistics on what the best location for a shop would be. After his partner dropped out, the company didn't



pressure him to place a large order. "Our business model is that we not only start people in business, but work with them very closely to become successes," said Joe DeFio, the Hailun account executive at the time. In fact, Hailun has hired an adviser to train its dealers about sales and marketing. "The success of the small to medium dealers is just as important as the success of larger dealers. We've actually expanded our territories, because we can go with the smaller dealers into areas that larger manufacturers just can't reach."

Nieves used his savings, took out a \$15,000 cash advance from a credit card and opened The Piano Store in Rocklin, Calif., in August 2012, with four new

and 10 used pianos in a 1,300 square foot space.

### MARKETING ON A SHOESTRING

Without money to spare for marketing, Nieves advertised the opening of his business on Craigslist, which he figured to be the first place many customers would be looking. He posted his used inventory, and also advertised in the Services section. The Service ad said, "Need help looking for a piano? Want to talk to an expert?" and offered to help people find a good piano, whether they bought from him or not. The ads did point out, though, that his pianos came with a warranty and were inspected by technicians.

He provided the best ser-

vice he could to these Craigslist customers, and word of mouth spread. For one family who answered the ad, Nieves looked up the serial number of the piano they wanted; explained how to clean it; and loaned them a moving dolly, straps and a blanket so they could move it themselves. All this for a \$300 piano they bought from someone else. But the effort paid off down the line. The family recommended Nieves to their neighbors, who came in and bought a \$20,000 piano. "Craigslist has been 78 percent of my business," he said.

### KEYS TO SUCCESS

Nieves' strategy was working. By March 2013, he was able to pay off the loans that he used to open the business. (Total out of pocket was around \$30,000, he said.) About four months after he opened, Nieves started carrying Young Chang pianos. That company, too, was willing to work with him despite his short track record. And as of November 2013, just a year in, he had sold 84 pianos.

He said his success has come from consumers looking for good quality at a good price. "I make an average of about 800 bucks a piano, which is nothing," he said. "I made more when I sold pianos on commission. But in

a year, I would sell probably, at best, 38 pianos. When you sell 62 pianos a year and you do that at a small profit, that adds up to greater than what I used to make at an average of maybe \$1,500 in commission."

Nieves sells mostly baby grands. "People come in my store thinking they can only afford an upright. But my used baby grands are right there in a price for a decent-quality upright, so they end up buying that," he said. The uprights are priced to appeal to budget shoppers.

"You've got to educate people who have no idea what they're looking for in pianos," Nieves said. "The second thing is, you've got to earn their trust." He realized a network of technicians and teachers would help him do that. He circled back to experienced friends from his days in sales, and because his wife teaches, he cultivates that network as well. He refers business to them and invites them to come in to have coffee and try his pianos. Even if they don't like the lines he carries, they may recommend his shop for used pianos.

Nieves does a brisk business selling pianos on consignment. As with new instruments, he keeps prices low, and the consigner makes most of the money. He refurbishes the pianos and has them detailed. "Anyone who's buying a piano — they want something as close to new as possible," he said.

His consignment contract specifies a six-month time limit, but if a piano doesn't sell he simply reevaluates the pricing with the consigner. "I want them to walk out of the situation happy. I'm willing to lose the money to keep my name fresh," he said. "I have a waiting list of consigning pianos right now."

**WEB PRESENCE**

Since there are only two other piano stores in the area, The Piano Store tends to appear in the top three for Web search results. And the name of the store is great for search-engine optimization. "That's why I named my store 'The Piano Store,'" Nieves said. People remember the name because it's simple. "My friends could never remember the names of the businesses that I worked for, and so they'd always say, 'Hey, are you working at the piano store?'"

Now, of course, he is — his own. **MI**

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