

# Customer Retention

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We don't have a business if we don't have customers. What does it take to find and keep a customer? It is always easier to keep an existing customer than to find a new one. Why do the most successful technicians always have endless work?

This month's technical is something we have never done before. Rather than one speaker, we are all the speakers. Be prepared to share and learn. Each of us has a unique way of relating with our customers and running our businesses. This meeting will be a rare chance for us to share, teach, learn, grow and improve our skills pertaining to customer retention. Some of us have thousands of customers, others have a few major repeat clients, and then a few of us are just beginning.

If you have no customers, this is an opportunity for you to learn how to start your business. If you have even one customer, we are interested to know how you found that customer and how you plan on continuing service with that customer. For those of us who have been in the business for years, this is the perfect opportunity for each of us to fine-tune our skills and to increase our customer bases, particularly in this new era of decline in our industry.

Put some thought into the following questions. It will be interesting, eye-opening and productive to hear what each other has learned and practiced over the years. The chairs are arranged in a circle because we all equally share the need for customer retention. The better we improve our skills, the stronger our businesses become.

- How did you find your first customers?
- How do you advertise now for new customers?
- If you have a web site, how does it work for you?
- Do you send out emails, reminder cards, make phone calls, or just wait to be called?
- How do you schedule appointments?
- How far in advance do you book?
- Who were your role models for building your business? What did they do?
- How do you assure yourself that each customer will have you come back?
- What activity is your biggest money-maker?
- What do you say in order to turn a basic tuning into a larger, more lucrative project?
- What do you do to increase the amount of work you can be doing?
- What do you enjoy doing the most?
- What is one thing you always do with every customer?
- What is your biggest time-waster?
- What is your overall goal with your business?
- What is your exit plan when you are ready to slow down or retire?
- What words of advice do you have for the rest of us?

These questions are simply guidelines to use as a jump-off point for narration and discussion as our conversation moves around the circle, moderated by Dean.

## **Don Galt**

One of Dean's biggest role models for maintaining a strong business was Don Galt. He built up an excellent reputation for himself, mastered his skills, contributed significantly to the guild, and was devoted to his profession. He always had as much work as he wanted – never too much or too little. How did he do this?

1. First, he blocked out the days of the week when he was willing to work; this guaranteed his wife that he would be home with her on the non-work days.
2. Second, he made it his routine practice, at the end of each tuning, to schedule the next follow-up tuning six months later. If the customer would not schedule that time, then he would inform the customer that if the customer would not schedule that time then Don would drop that customer from his list and would fill that slot with another customer. He could afford to do this because he had a waiting list of customers. Twice a year he would service each of his customers. The customers appreciated the regularity, and because these relationships became so strong and dedicated over the years, Don's reputation continued to grow and expand, which also enabled him to justify charging higher prices.
3. Since he would tune only a certain number of pianos a day and had reserved only so many days a year in which to work, his list of clients exceeded the number of days he had, so if anyone did drop out or move he could always fill that slot with someone from his waiting list. In this way he had a dependable income with loyal repeat customers, as well as guaranteed money and guaranteed time off to do the other things he enjoyed.

## **Dean Petrich**

I started tuning in 1973. After several different attempts at calling customers off my database to ask if they would like me to tune their pianos, I have learned that many people would rather not be called: they think their piano sounds fine, they have no money at the time, no one is playing the piano or cares, they don't like being interrupted and solicited, and so forth. The only situation I would ever consider calling customers would be if I were desperate for money, which I never am because my business remains fairly constant.

For many years I have been sending out tuning reminder cards twice a year – once in the fall when school is starting, like August or September, and once in the early spring, like February when school concerts and plays, graduations, weddings and other spring events are being planned. Since many people are gone during the summers and don't play their pianos then, these spring cards dribble into calls over the summer during the quiet season.

What happens with cards is that only a small percentage of the recipients act on them immediately. Most people put the card on the piano, on the refrigerator, on their desk or in their card file; months and sometimes years may go by, but then something will not sound right or not work on the piano, and they go straight to the card and call. I get people who say "I just got your card" and when I ask for the date they reply it arrived sometimes years before; so I smile simply because the card worked: it produced a job.

On the address label of the card I print the last time I serviced their piano. On the card itself I explain the reasons for keeping a piano regularly serviced, and suggest an immediate call because their piano is once again ready to be serviced. I add a

sense of urgency by mentioning that my schedule books up quickly, so it would be wise to call soon to book and appointment. It is interesting to note that people generally do as they are told. Tell them to do something and they will do it. Even though this technique works with verbal commands, it surprisingly works with cards as well. End with a reason, a call to action and a sense of urgency.

Another thing I do is to follow Don Galt's wise practice of scheduling the next appointment at the conclusion of each current appointment. I heard someone say once that ultimately the reason we call people on the phone is to schedule the next time we are going to call them. The same applies with scheduling future work.

A third thing I do with every customer is to itemize all the issues and future maintenance I see that their piano needs or will require. While this is needed but not happening now, people realize that their piano really does need more than just tuning, and their minds start thinking about how and when they would like to have all the rest of the work done. Because all pianos need continual maintenance, this practice of schedule future work above and beyond tunings is the key to becoming financially successful as a piano technician. Tuning is simply the introduction, the foot in the door, and the beginning of a long-term routine maintenance relationship. Look for problems and suggest solutions and people will ask to pay you more to make their piano perfect.

Concerning advertising, I have given up on magazine and newspaper ads, and even on online directories. I have cancelled all these ads and have instead focused on creating a website full of content and key words that brings me a smattering of new customers each month. I designed my own site and do not pay any money for SEO. In addition to attracting new customers, having a web site is handy to have simply as an online brochure. It puts other ideas into people's minds about their pianos besides basic tuning. I do also keep a presence in the local printed phone book.

### **Ginny Baer**

Ginny hates the phone. She uses her phone as voice mail. She has an accordion file sorted by month. She fills out and files postcards by the month and sends them out on each appropriate month. She never calls to remind people because she doesn't book anything more than three to four weeks in advance. Her post cards are colored and have attractive designs.

Most of her new business is from her web sites, customer referrals, and piano teachers. In particular she appreciates the referrals from piano teachers who haven't had her tune their pianos but who refer their students to her.

### **Vada Youngford**

In Alaska Vada had been working for seven years tuning pianos. Her role models were her parents and her step-dad's family. Her parents are in their 70's. With a background in economics, they are political activists opposed to the oil industry; they are extremely busy. Before she came down here, her step dad gave her three words of advice:

1. Work hard
2. Know your trade
3. Use your time efficiently

Vada wants to be a piano technician, and is not necessarily concerned about being rich. To retain clients, a good deal of this is psychological. As she talks with them she will add into her database information about their kids, their hobbies, their families, their jobs and activities. Then when she returns to their houses she asks them how things are going and picks up the conversation where they left off on her last visit. This builds strong relationships because she shows them that she cares and remembers.

To use your time efficiently, it is important to plan time spent on the road. Ask constantly if the travel time is going to equal the income for the amount needed. Some people calculate out their week. Vada will calculate her day, balancing business, piano technology, and personal time. In business there is updating records, marketing, keeping a log, and more. In technology she works on improving her tuning and rebuilding. Personal time is important: breathe, go outside, play.

She does use Google, Facebook and Linked In, but is not ready for a web site because she is concerned her business may grow too fast. Social networking is working great.

### **Kenn Wildes**

Kenn has his store, but he still likes to get out and tune a lot to stay connected with the community. He focuses on his tuning. While he is out he is managing his employees. When he tunes he feels that he is tuning himself and tuning his business.

Kenn uses emails as reminders: no postcards. Once a month he will send an email to each customer for whom he tuned twelve months before. Then he has created a special calendar of events posted on his Google calendar for people who are committed to the next tuning. The other people not on this calendar simply get reminder emails. On these reminder emails he has a little blurb about his store.

His tuning and restoration web site has been on line for fifteen years. His store web site is more recent. Having two web sites catches both the people who knew him years ago, as well as the people who know only about the store. His old card was Ken Wildes. His tuning customers know him as Wildes Pianos. Ken's philosophy is to help people with their pianos in any way; he is not a store, he is a technician.

Kenn shares the space with the music business because they all split the cost of building it. They charge rent for use of the space. At least half of Ken's pianos were obtained for free from people wanting to get rid of them. He then works on them, but rarely refinishes them. It's amazing how many pianos were refinished by previous owners. You can't sell a piano that looks horrible. It is really satisfying to take pianos that were going to the dump and then to rescue and restore them.

A lot of people don't know that their piano can be improved. We can't be doing extra work without telling them about it. It's risky to do extra work to change something like the tone, and then find out the customer liked it the way it was and didn't want anything changed. However, talking over improvement suggestions with the customer in advance gives them the option to do more. This is education, presenting what condition it is in, what can be done, the different levels of improvement, and making them aware of the possibilities for their piano; this activity plants seeds in their minds that may not be acted on for years. At least they are aware of what can be done.

Windex Wipes work really well for quickly polishing up key tops. Tell them you did it, and mark down on the receipt that you did it for free. Ammonia will oxidize brass, so don't use these on brass.

### **Nathan Jensen**

Nathan was in Olympia on the top of Mt. Olympus Drive. When he walked in the son commented that Nathan was a piano technician, and they commented, "no, he just has a really good ear." From Nathan's experience, most technicians are not musical performers, although most tuners play instruments. As a professional musician, Nathan is asked often how many piano tuners are musicians.

### **Joan Smith**

Joan has a web site, Linked In and a Facebook page. She puts up fliers in coffee shops, and for every flier she gets a customer. She was on the radio once, but nothing came of that. Her web site is registered with Google and Bing, and has links, but doesn't get a lot of business. She treats it like a brochure. Her whole web site was created on line by a woman in Portland; once every three or four months she updates her site.

### **Anthony Willey**

Anthony has a web page but no social media. He has been tuning part-time for a long time, but full-time for about a year. Right now 90% of his customers are new and find him on line. He is just beginning to get a few call-backs from last year. Anthony hates trying to sell people, so he puts his price on the web page and gets calls only from people who are happy with that price. He uses his site for a filter and does not charge extra for a pitch raise. Whenever he tunes a piano he always find something extra to do, so he will add into the tuning whatever is the most pressing issue; this is all part of the price. Steve Brady does what he calls a "service charge," which is a tuning plus something else. Anthony vacuums about 25% of the pianos he tunes, adds that on the invoice but does not charge. He hates charging more than he quotes.

(Auto dealers are regulated, but they are allowed to go 15% over their estimate.)

Anthony pays for Google AdWords to position his site. After he moved here he paid a guy \$90 to do SEO; two days later he appeared on the top page of Google, so he stopped that SEO because he was scared to be on top.

Anthony had no money when he first came here, so he walked into Prosser and started tuning for them for a very low price per piano. It got him started.

### **Bill Barber**

Twenty years ago Bill jumped in with both feet and started with Steve Brady for a year and a half. He walked around passing out fliers advertising free tunings and got about a 10% return. He wanted to practice on as many pianos as he could to be able to pass the exam. For his first fifteen years Bill did store work, and got a lot of direct and second-generation referrals from the stores.

To retain his customers, Bill sends out reminder cards. A dental office suggested that he should have the customers fill out their own reminder cards in their own handwriting, because they will recognize their writing and will actually look at the card.

No-shows are frequently flakes who really didn't want their pianos tuned to start with. Regular clients who are no-shows are very apologetic. For new clients who did not show, when they re-book, he adds on his no-show fee onto the bill of the next tuning.

For a while he didn't charge for pitch raises. However, pitch raises require wear and tear on his body, so he does charge extra for them now. Bill does not have a web site. He is really not interesting in building and expanding a business; he wants to keep his existing clients. He has retained his clients not by going as a business person, but as a friend. He will stand and talk with them for the first fifteen or twenty minutes before starting to work. He talks about their pets, encourages the kids to watch and ask questions, and treats his clients like long-term friends.

Bill always gives out two business cards to everybody. He gives one to the customer and places one in the piano.

### **Scott Craven**

Scott has one client who regularly books every six months. He does a lot of work for regular businesses, large corporations, and performing arts centers with last-minute requests. Scott does not make calls but does get call-backs. His first customers were through musical friends. Other technicians refer him. He has a web site which was set up for him, but he hasn't done much with it. Scott also gets referrals from the PTG site.

If there is a problem with a piano, it is important to be a bit diplomatic. He does take time to discuss any issues. He will grin and bear pianos that need more service when the customer doesn't need or want anything else done. He does have one Knabe concert grand in a mansion that has quite a bit of wear on it, but the customers won't fix it. Remember that you're not the center of what's going on; tuning the piano is just part of what is going on, even if there is a roto-hammer directly overhead. Scott carries bottles of polish and sprays to make the instrument look better.

### **Corinne Casemy**

Most of her customers are great. When she was first starting to look for tuning clients, her twin brother and partner got her name out there. Her first clients were off Face Book. Right now she has as much business as she wants. Sometimes she will stop by piano stores and drop off some business cards.

### **Dale Lendeke**

Dale is just getting started. He just retired from working at the post office and finally has some time to spend on pianos. His biggest customer is the church piano where his wife spends time. Most of his clients have been through friends. He has started Face Book and Linked In. His wife has a separate Face Book page and is all over it. She dances at different centers and refers Dale, who does a very good job. She has been a major source of customers for him.

One thing they do is to donate tunings to auctions. Auction programs provide excellent exposure.

Dale went through Randy Potter's class where he learned to do extra things: tighten bench bolts, vacuum, and other miscellany, all of which is included in the tuning fee. Then he also points out possible work that could be done in the future, explaining that the other tasks can be split up and done over time.

## **Jim Faris**

Whatever you do for reminders to get customers to tune pianos, just do it. It doesn't really matter how: it's what works for you and what works for your customers. It will become part of what your customers expect from you. Keep your customers on a regular schedule of tuning. They will come to expect it. If you are not regular, they will drop off, find another tuner, or forget about their pianos. Keep in touch.

As far as retaining customers is concerned, make sure that complaint calls that you hate to get should be highest priority. When you're done, you've tuned the piano and you get a call back two days later, follow up right away. When you get there, usually it will have corrected itself and there will be nothing wrong. Now you have a chance to talk about scheduling additional work. If you wait long enough, the problem may go away. However, by showing up right away it shows the customer that you care about them, about your work, and that you are conscientious. This impresses the customer and deepens your relationship.

## **Ed McMorrow**

Ed started tuning in the fall of 1971. As we know, he is a bit of an outlier, so he can't offer traditional advice. Long ago he decided to do something about pianos that can produce what the clients want. Find what meets their needs and your abilities. Ed and his clients have grown old together. We're in the business of helping people to improve the musical utility of their pianos. We have to be cognizant of the nebulous areas of pianos, and it is important to identify what the clients want. We can make their piano even more important to them, and we can make a living off of this. Anybody who wants an incredible piano, this is what Ed tries to create with each instrument.

Ed doesn't call people back, but he does talk about what needs to be worked on. With first-time appointments there are usually more issues with the piano than just tuning. Carefully figure out the groundwork of the customer's expectations. When doing service calls, don't park in their driveway because you don't want to block them. Take your shoes off. Pick up on their vibes. When Ed had really long hair he had customers shut the door in his face. Make people comfortable. Our job is to make people feel attached to their pianos.

Ed has not put together a web site. When he gets on a task he focuses on it. He doesn't want too many things to focus on at once.

## **Joe Goheen**

Joe started tuning in 1977 and got a lot of his first work working with dealers for fifteen years. He got quite a bit of work that way. He tries to take enough time to do a little extra work with each piano after tuning. Your best advertising is the piano you just finished tuning. Most of his work now comes from referrals. Joe saw a sign that read, "We do three kinds of work: fast, good and cheap. You can pick any two."

When pricing a job, he gives a range within fifty dollars, and a maximum overall price. He gets a sense of their playing level and the piano condition. He asks himself what is good for the piano, good for the customer, and good for himself? When he is getting ready to leave, he thinks what would be an appropriate time interval for their next service.

Joe doesn't like the computer, so he doesn't have a web site, Face Book, Linked In, etc. He simply asks people when he is done, "Would you like me to call you?" They almost always reply "yes." For those who don't schedule anything, he will send them a reminder card in a couple years; at least that's better than five or ten years. He does his reminder calls and cards by the month. He used to wait until he had blank spots in his calendar and would then call people to fit into those slots. Now each month he calls his most regular customers first and books them into his best slots for that month. If people do not respond, he will call them about three times and will then send a card. If they haven't contacted him for ten years, he may send them a card but he won't call them again.

When he raises his prices, which he does periodically, he tries to keep his most regular customers at a lower rate for a while; he tries to keep good care of his regular clients. He uses the less frequent people as a trial balloon to test price increases. He doesn't raise his rates very often, but when he does it is a fair jump. If he keeps the people at the same rate for five years and they object to the new price, he will keep them at the old price.

### **Call-Backs**

- *Joe:* For call-backs, when you put the keys and cheek blocks back in, push the pedal to check for clearance. It is better to fix everything while you are there than to have to come back to fix something you missed. Explain and show the customer what you see in the piano.
- To justify solving the issue for free, schedule call-backs for the next time when you will be in their area.
- When far away, ask the customer to send a picture or a video of the part in question.
- *Vada:* Small Business Administration offers lots of free advice and help. They have a web site, brochures, classes, and other valuable resources for running a business.