

Making the Most of Your Tuning Visit

Curtis Spiel

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Curtis does not charge for a pitch raise. He is after a long-term customer. Tuning a piano does not necessarily make it musical. An extra ten minutes spent here or there can make a big difference, such as tightening bolts or making minor adjustments. Most first-time customers don't realize that a piano needs more than tuning. Regular customers are aware that there are other factors that are necessary.

Most kids last about a year with piano lessons. However, the kids who stay with it might last for several years. Then other things happen in their lives and the piano becomes neglected. Even if these kids stick with piano past twelve years old and continue into high school, they will eventually go to college. Good customers continue to have their pianos serviced even after the kids are gone.

People who like their pianos are more likely to play more. Without charging for extra things, Curtis will charge for two hours of time whether he tunes, repairs, or both. For a set "tuning" fee, Curtis charges one fee for whatever he can get done during his two-hour visit. Anything beyond that gets re-scheduled for a future appointment. Often when people want their piano "tuned" they often mean "any adjustment." People who take care of their pianos already have a technician; this means that new customers who have no technicians probably have no technician and their pianos are not in particularly good shape.

When Curtis walks into a home, he might find that the piano is pretty good. It might not have been regulated since it left the factory, but the people play it. Initially, they just hired him to tune the piano, and it is not his mission to fix everything. To begin with, he will vacuum the piano. Then he will run his fingers down all the keys. Upon examination, the piano doesn't play really well and has a variable regulation. First, he starts tuning; this provides a chance to assess the piano. To warm up, Curtis does a quick tuning on the mid-section with his Acutuner. Now he has decided that there is no after-touch. He has been here for twenty minutes and doesn't have time to do a full regulation, but he could establish some after-touch. This is simply a matter of turning the capstan screws. As the capstans come up, watch for wear patterns rather than looking for a straight line: strive for after-touch. Then he'll tune the piano and fix the squeaky bench.

When he is finished, people will comment "This feels great! What did you do to my piano?" He answers, "I did a little regulation. It could use more." Some people want their pianos to work well, and others don't care. Those who do care ask, "What can we do next time?"

Curtis loves to regulate. Frank Morgan used to hire Curtis to regulate his pianos for him, since he just liked to tune because he was legally blind. Ultimately Curtis' hope is that he does something to the piano so that the customer notices and wants more work. Simply by making the customer aware of the difference, the customer wants more.

After adjusting the capstans, the next step would be to adjust let-off. Changing punchings is a much more involved job and becomes a separate issue; this usually isn't brought up the first visit. The first time they meet Curtis, he starts simply to build confidence. He shows up on time, does good service and accomplishes what was agreed

on. If it is a big pitch raise, he recommends another tuning in two to six weeks. People self-select themselves what they want to have done. A regulation basically sells itself.

The objective is to find a regular customer. Showing up on time, spending the exact two hours he promised, and charging them the exact amount he promised, plus now the piano sounds and plays better, he now has four points in his favor. People really appreciate having the technician arrive exactly on time. The people who call back are those who want their pianos in good condition.

Curtis writes everything he does on the invoice, including notes to himself. He marks how many cents off the tuning was, what he did, and he writes “No Charge” on the extra items he did within his two hours. This provides predictability and credibility.

People in Eastern Washington install full Damp Chaser systems. People who live on salt water need dehumidifiers to chase out the salty dampness. If you can smell the salt water, the air is salty and the piano could definitely use a Damp Chaser. Always include the humidistat, and if the customers don't have a humidistat, order them one. Wood takes on moisture five times as much as it gives it up.

Here is another example of a first-time visit. Let's say it needs a pitch raise. Curtis does three levels of tuning. The first is a 25-minute tuning with his Acutuner. This is a quick Level One tuning. On the second pass he will tune, listening to the intervals, getting the lights to stop. Now there are fifteen minutes left for fixing things. Curtis' Level Three perfect tuning has to begin with a good starting point.

When visiting the same pianos, it becomes easier to know what to do and how to tune it. First-time tunings are a little more difficult. It is hard to tune a piano if the voicing is awful. String-leveling, hammer filing or other voicing issues influence the sound of the note; for this reason other work is important. By including the work, Curtis doesn't have to ask the customer's permission to do more work. Nobody complains when the piano sounds better.

voicing, battling the abrasive note. Shallow needling is not a long-lasting voicing technique, but it will get him through the tuning. This gets the customer to realize that the piano can actually sound better. The piano has to be in pretty good condition before voicing. It is hard to hear stuff if the piano sounds bad. Tuning is easier and more precise when the piano works well. Point out the little changes; this makes them happy and gains their confidence.

Sophisticated players have a sound that they expect. They play very well and expect things to be right. We all make hundreds of mistakes during a tuning, but the difference is that our mistakes are miniscule. They are such tiny tolerances that although most people might not notice, sophisticated players will catch them. When they ask for something better and question us, retune the note and ask if they like the interval better. If they say “Yes,” then say, “OK, I'll fix this whole section.” Some European pianos have some weird scales and tune differently.

Going back to the three types of tunings, here is Curtis' sequence. After the first two tunings, he will say that it needs a third tuning within a few weeks, at the same price of these first two tunings. “It needs to be tuned pretty soon because it was so far out. This is going to change. Picture this: at this point on the string there is a kink, and when I tuned the piano I have slid the wire off the kink. In a few weeks that old kink is going to straighten out and the note is going to go flat. That's why it will need to be tuned again.”

There are different categories of customers. For example, beginning adults might have no idea what condition the piano is. Males buy 65% of expensive grand pianos. Whatever the kind of customer, always tell people what you did on the piano. Before doing a repeat call, look up the piano records on the invoice or the spread sheet so that you know what condition the piano is in and what it needs.

Filing hammers can make a dramatic difference. Ten minutes of filing can change the tone. Since the dust goes everywhere, keep a vacuum going when done in the home. Otherwise, file hammers in the shop.

Curtis figures out how much he wants to make a year, and then how many hours a week he needs to work to make that amount.

Curtis' rules:

- Show up on time.
- Do honest work
- Do complete, whole piano service
- Tell them what you did.
- Show them what it needs.
- Let the customer tell you what they want.
- Follow up on your customers pianos and keep them in top shape.