

A Missed Opportunity To Understand The Piano Market

Veteran piano retailer Greg Billings offers a critique of the recent Piano Manufacturers market survey, concluding, “After 30 years of selling pianos, I’ve never met a customer who resembles their piano buyer profile.”

I’ve read the 21st Century Piano Project market research recently presented, with great fanfare, by the Piano Manufacturers Association International. [A summary of the survey appeared in the September issue of *Music Trades*.] In my humble opinion, there are two likely consequences of this report. First, the Piano Manufacturers will believe their results, and even scarier, they will act on them.

According to the market research, the composite piano buyer of the new millennium is a 48-year-old, classical-music-loving male, with 12 years of lessons, who is active in his Church music program. Strangely, this buyer is not concerned about the price of the piano or what it looks like. His primary concerns are tone, touch, and the brand name. (He just doesn’t happen to know any brand names except Steinway, Baldwin, and Yamaha). Amazingly, he plans to keep his trade-in and pay cash. He is buying the piano for himself rather than for his children, which does make sense when you consider that he is probably too old to have children at home.

PMAI’s presumptive piano purchaser is significantly more likely to purchase a Petrof or Mason & Hamlin piano than he is to purchase a Baldwin, Boston, or Pearl River piano. He prefers Yamaha pianos by a margin of 2 to 1 over all other brands combined. These conclusions bear no reasonable relationship to the real market for pianos.

For over 30 years I have owned or managed piano stores that have sold about 5,000 pianos. In that time I can’t recall ever meeting a customer who matches the PMAI profile. (Well, maybe one or two.) There have been a few older male clients who bought pianos for themselves; but they certainly were price conscious. These guys were more likely to play standards and jazz than classical music. If they had a wife, the piano’s appearance did matter. I also can’t recall meeting very many people other than piano teachers who studied piano formally for 12 years.

How could this report be so completely out of sync with the real marketplace? My guess is that both the questionnaire and the sample group were defective. Furthermore, respondents tend to deceive themselves when filling out questionnaires, especially on their computers in the privacy of their own homes.

Here’s how I suspect the survey was actually conducted. “Selected” dealers encouraged “selected” customers to respond to a survey. Hardly a “random,” let alone a representative, sam-



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ple! (I must admit, I opted out when PMAI asked me to call all of my customers and encourage them to participate in the survey. I didn’t see any possible way I could take on such a monumental task.)

The study probably is a reasonable representation of a hand-picked group of people who were willing to sit at a computer and fill out a questionnaire. Of course, this group would skew male and older. They might well see themselves as cash-rich, classical music aficionados with 12 years of formal study. They also might consider singing carols on Christmas Eve service as being active in the church music program. And why would they

admit being concerned about the price of the piano or what it looks like? Anyone who has actually sold pianos can tell you that most customers are embarrassed to admit their concern about the appearance of a piano.

Here is a typical example of a flaw in the construction of the questionnaire: While 48% of current shoppers say they currently have a “keyboard,” they weren’t asked what kind of keyboard. It would have been wonderful to know if it was a piano or a portable keyboard. If it was a portable, we would have evidence that keyboards really do create new music makers. If they were pianos, why aren’t they trading them in, and what will we do with all those used pianos if they do?

The survey seemed to assume that taking piano lessons was a lifelong endeavor. Wouldn’t it have been more useful to find out why those who quit lessons in the first or second year do so? What we got instead was a laundry list of why people quit lessons. Well, everybody quits eventually. Duh! Obviously, careful thought was not given to the construction of the questionnaire.

The survey also failed to investigate why uprights have fallen out of favor. If you drew a graph of the number of upright pianos sold over the last 80 years, and superimposed a graph of the average height of those pianos, you would conclude that the smaller you build them, the more units are sold. However, the

piano manufacturers are steadfastly committed to forcing 46" cabinet pianos into a market place that doesn't want them. There has yet to be a "hit" product in that category, and I have yet to have a customer request one.

The report's conclusion that the PMAI "Code of Ethics" was responsible for a reported positive buying experience by a vast majority of respondents would have been rejected in a ninth grade term paper. A prior measurement of buyers experience would be necessary to draw a conclusion. And would a customer who had a negative experience be likely to buy a piano, let alone complete a questionnaire? When you think about, it is actually amazing that so many people who had a negative experience bought a piano anyway. This is a blatant attempt on the part of PMAI to vindicate their former failed attempt to establish a "Code of Ethics."

Many dealers found the prospect of having a Code of Ethics imposed upon them from the manufacturers offensive. Dealers' attempts to settle their disputes with appeals to Code of Ethics were rebuffed or even ridiculed. We clearly advised the PMAI that the primary benefit of a Code of Ethics was not in having one, but rather in the "process" of writing one. We encouraged PMAI to establish a program to encourage local dealers to get together and create their own Codes of Ethics. The request fell on deaf ears. The PMAI, after years of delay, and

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with great pomp and ceremony, issued a Code of Ethics.

Now, because the Code of Ethics came from the top down, as opposed to the grass roots program we suggested, the whole issue is largely forgotten. I have visited many piano stores in the last five years, and so far as I know, I am one of only a few dealers displaying the code.

There are a few useful pieces of information that can be gleaned from these reports;

- There is a major difference between the buyers' attitude about price and the perception of dealers and manufacturers. (This may explain the demise of the domestic piano industry in the '80s. The market then was clearly showing a preference for "better" pianos while the American manufacturers persisted in building "cheaper" pianos.)
- Customers are really uninformed about brand names, especially digital piano customers. One in eight digital

piano buyers reported purchasing a brand that doesn't even exist.

- While 46% of prospective customers considered the internet a source of information, only 6% considered purchasing online, and only 1% actually purchased pianos there. (Possibly all these numbers are vastly understated, but the ratio is interesting.)

In conclusion this is a very flawed report and is of limited value in charting a course for the future. It represents a major missed opportunity to gather what might have been valuable information.

If the PMAI wants to do something really useful, they should consider the following;

- Repeat the survey, but narrow its focus and have it done professionally. Subject it to strict scientific methodology, not just statistical review.
- Reinstate the compilation of market-by-market unit shipments that was so useful in targeting opportunities for manufacturers and dealers.
- Establish a grass-roots program to encourage local dealers to get together and write their own Codes of Ethics.

Also, they can come down from their ivory tower. My guess is that it's been a couple of decades since most of these guys were eyeball to eyeball with a real customer. The 21st Century Piano Project certainly doesn't get them any closer to understanding the realities of today's marketplace.