



Affiliate Tips and Tricks

A Top Ten List of Great Ideas From VIR Affiliates

Pre-Fill Your Rental Agreements

What's the best way to train your employees on the paperwork process of a rental? Have them practice filling out agreements. What's the most time-consuming part of the rental process? Completing the rental agreement. Want to kill two birds with one stone? Gather your employees when your opening shipment arrives, pre-fill as much of a rental agreement for each instrument (instrument info, rental rates, etc.) and place the paperwork inside each instrument's case. Your employees practiced the paperwork process and you cut the time spent with each rental customer in half.

Spiff Your Employees

As the owner of your business, you are more in tune with your ROI and profit margins. It is a sad truth that many of today's high-dollar guitars, keyboards and other combo gear yield less profit than the commissions and related high-profit accessories of band & orchestra rentals. So how do you keep your employees from ignoring the rental customer when another is gazing at the Gibson Custom Shop Les Paul? Spiff your employees \$2 or more of your available per-contract bonus. Each rental customer will pad the salesperson's hourly wage by a couple of dollars, thus, making them look a little more attractive.

Incorporate a Free Lesson

Those who rent space to lesson instructors should take advantage of a golden opportunity that could further solidify your business relationship while offering a value-added benefit to your rental customers. Negotiate a free lesson with your instructors (many will do it at no cost) for every new rental. The instructor will benefit by gaining access to new prospects. It will be their responsibility, of course, to close the sale of regular enrollment. You'll be able to add the "Free Lesson With Every Rental" blurb on your advertising and add value to your services. The student will have a head start going into their first day of school music and the educators will be ever-grateful for assisting them in educating their students in the proper assembling, disassembling and care for their instrument (maybe even making a noise with the mouthpiece, if time allows).

Branding Through Incentives

Here are two strategies that help drive traffic to your store while promoting your trade name. The first is the tee shirt giveaway: One free shirt for every child that rents an instrument from your store. Doesn't sound like a big deal, but it has been for several Affiliates and it can be for you, too. One Affiliate claims that a student not wearing one of their shirts at a particular school is like being the Sneetchy without a star on their belly. Shirts are cheap (under \$2 for two-sided color). Another great idea has been the student discount and/or club membership card. The elite group of students (anyone who rents from you) will be entitled to 10% off sheet music, method books or maybe select accessories. Advertising could include "\$150 value, free with your rental" and could drive additional sales. Cards are cheap, too, if you choose to use business card stock.

Accessory Packaging

Some of the best margins in your store come from accessories such as method books, reeds, cleaning kits, metronomes and music stands. Using the results of the Music Educator Survey and a large format printing of the Accessory Sign template (both available at Affiliate Resources), several Affiliates have created accessory packages tailored to the preferences of each school. It's an easy sale to the parent when you have the endorsement of their child's music educator. Here's an example: "What school does your child attend? Oh yes, Mr. Smith is the instructor there. When I spoke with him a few weeks ago, he recommended the Standard of Excellence Book One, 5 Vandoren reeds, a cleaning kit and a folding sheet music stand for home practice. If purchased separately, these items would cost around \$65, but we packaged them together for Oak Grove Middle students for only \$45." Clean and simple, how can a parent decline?

Upgrade Promotion

An analysis of VIR's in-house upgrade efforts show that parents are most likely to upgrade their child's rental instrument between the 12th month and the 15th month. While most of the rentals occur between August and October, this puts the sweet spot right at the Christmas season of the following year. Using the resources available to them through VIR (mailing lists, upgrade samples, advertising templates), as well as the increased traffic in their stores, many Affiliates capitalize on this golden opportunity to increase commissions (sometimes double on each account) and extend the length of a customer's agreement (on average by 18 months). Some great ways to create the hype is to include upgrades in your holiday advertising, rotate samples to the local schools, send personal invitations-by-mail to your qualifying accounts and/or host a promotion at your store. Better yet, get the educators behind it and host exclusive meetings at the schools.

Summer Retention

The national average rate of instrument returns is close to 50%. Even the smallest effort to deter a return can have a big impact on your Summer commissions. A VIR Affiliate recently claimed to have reduced returns by 40% through silent salesmen ([Keepyourinstrument.pdf](#)) and proper employee training. Surprisingly, a large number of rental customers are not aware that our program is equity-building. By retuning an instrument for the Summer, customers walk away from hundreds of dollars of rent credit, only to start from zero again a few months later. A sincere, brief, practiced statement from your employee (in addition to the retention brochure) could save the account. An example of a persuasive argument: "Mrs. Jones, you have nearly \$200 in rent credit. If there is even a remote chance that your child will be in band next year, rent this instrument for a few more months, regardless, if the horn sits in the closet all Summer. If Jimmy joins band again in the Fall, you'll have your instrument almost halfway paid for. If you return it now, you'll walk away from all of that money. Then if Jimmy joins band again, you'll be starting all over again with zero equity."

Educator Hospitality

Music educators are the gate keepers to your customers. There's no denying it. The more frequent and positive interactions you have with them, the more business will be sent your way. Sometimes, the best way to sell your business is not to sell at all. Over the years, Affiliates have been very creative in achieving this objective including golf scrambles and Summer barbecues. One Affiliate found their way to an educator's heart through their stomach with a regular delivery of breakfast sandwiches. Some more traditional ways are to sponsor a hospitality room at marching competitions or offer to work with a section (if qualified, of course!). The bottom line: Give and you shall receive. A sincere gesture of assistance to an educator will go a long way.

Bargain Instrument Comparison

It doesn't look like the bargain instruments (you know, the ones you can buy at the same place you buy your toilet paper?) are going away as fast as we'd like. In the mean time, there are many ways you can protect your market while being a hero to your customers and educators. Many Affiliates who offer instrument repair will not (because they can not) work on these horns. Because bargain instruments are consistently unserviceable, many times unplayable, they make great visual examples for customers. Affiliates are bending keys, melting solder and pulling pads in front of their customers to show them just how substandard bargain instruments really are. Further, Affiliates are educating the educators, many of which are frustrated by a band room full of beginners with instruments that don't play. VIR offers a year-round trade-in promotion where customer can exchange their bargain instruments for rent credit on one of our instruments. There is also a well-composed letter template addressed to music educators available at VIR's Affiliate Resources. It's going to take an effort on all levels to rid the industry of this cancer. An instrument that can't play belongs on the wall of a restaurant, not with a beginning student. Do your part and get involved. You'll be glad you did!

Continuous Employee Training

Since the first Affiliate Convention in 2002, VIR and its Affiliates have placed emphasis on the proper and continuous training of employees. The biggest problem to-date is the failure to train new employees (those who have been hired by the Affiliate long after partnering with VIR and going through the initial training). An honest mistake when you hire someone in February, a time of year where you couldn't be any further away from the rental season. Nonetheless, the problem exists and many Affiliates have taken steps to ensure their staff is up-to-speed and sharp. A recurring seminar at the Affiliate Convention includes a review of recorded phone calls made to unnamed Affiliates. Often humorous, the calls are dissected in an effort to determine what the salesperson did right and wrong. Several Affiliates have adopted this effective means of training within their own retail stores. Aside from the contract pre-fill party (the first tip on this document), another great way to train has been to make all employees read and initial any non-sensitive correspondence received from VIR including the QuickNotes monthly newsletter and the Pre & Post-Season Marketing Packages.