



Developing Your Music System

by Kent Holloway

Music is one of the first things customers will comment on as they become regulars and begin to share honest opinions about how you can improve your presentation.

In recent years, the idea of "ambiance" as a critical element to the success of an espresso retail concept has become essential in the minds of customers and commercial retail interior designers. Ambiance as a focus area for success, has been raised to a status equal to location, customer service, product quality, and excellent financial management. (I have identified these five elements many times as the fundamentals of espresso retail success.) Richard Melman, creator of the multi-million-dollar restaurant operation, Lettuce Entertain You, Inc., sums it up nicely in Martin E. Dorf's book, "Restaurants That Work," by saying, "People have gotten more sophisticated. It used to be that to run a successful restaurant all you needed was good food. Then you needed not just good food, but good service, too. Now you need to deliver great food, great service, ambiance, and possess a 'real' sense of what people want."

When I design a new espresso retail concept, I focus on the lighting (natural and fixtures), creating a variety of "spaces" (function), the music and background noises, the texture and comfort of the furnishings and the balance of the color scheme in the room. My goal as I plan a music program is to avoid giving customers reasons to start focusing on negatives: "Hey, why is it so quiet/loud in here?" "I hate this music!" "Why do I always hear the same music at the same time everyday when I come in here?" As owners/managers, we must provide an atmosphere which includes music that is appropriate to our target market's taste, maintains the perfect sound levels, is legal, and is consistent with the image of our establishment.

System (mistake) Number One: "The Boom Box"

I started out with a very exotic music system in my first store. It was the sheet rock workers' boom box that they had forgotten when they finished their work. It was strategically hung from a broom hook on the inside of the bar, covered in paint, and had a defective tape player. Needless to say, this arrangement didn't work very well. The music was too loud with the stereo aimed at the employees, and was impossible to hear at the far end of the shop. I didn't dare put it out where customers could see it and remark, "Beautiful shop, but it looks like Kent ran out of money before he got to his music system" (actually, I had!).

I drew three black lines on the face of the tuner to show staff where the only three "acceptable" stations were (one for classical, jazz, and Christian music on Sunday mornings).

You would be amazed at how many times I came in and found the boom box returned to its old home stations of classic rock, alternative rock, and top 40. The staff assured me that they hadn't touched the dial (yeah, right!).

System (mistake) Number Two: "The Rack System"

As soon as I could afford one, I went out and bought a full-blown rack stereo system. This is the system similar to the one your roommate had in college (does anyone else remember having stereo wars?) or the one you bought after college for your first apartment. They imitate the American muscle car mentality of the '70s, "bigger is better." It came with a five-disc CD player, a tuner, a double tape deck (which was immediately taken home), a record player (sold to a hippie at a garage sale), a smoked glass cabinet, and two four-foot high speakers. (I had to have really big speakers just in case the neighboring hair salon, dry cleaners or ice cream shop wanted to start some wars.)

This system didn't work out much better. Now the speakers were right in the customer's face. I tried to hide the giant speakers by covering them with a lace tablecloth and plants, but the bass still rattled the cups and plates on the customers' tables (it was like trying to drink coffee and have a conversation next to one of those "low rider" cars with a back seat full of speakers. Again, it was too loud in some areas of the shop and too quiet in others.

The other problem was that employees would bring in their own CDs to play "just during closing hours." One morning I came in and found Mrs. Regular standing at my door at 5 a.m. waiting for me to officially open a half hour later. I let her in early and went on with opening. When I turned on the stereo, The Bloody Toes' "Stepped On: Live From London" CD was still in the stereo at full volume. The shock wave of offensive noise hit us so hard that Mrs. Regular almost went into a coma and I was temporarily deafened.

New rule! No employee CDs for closing time.

System (mistake) Number Three "The Tape Program"

By now our shop had developed a reputation as a great destination espresso bar and our customer volumes were exciting. One day a rep from one of the large foreground music companies came in and informed me that our system was illegal because we weren't paying American Society of Composers, Authors and Publishers (ASCAP) fees on the music we were playing. The implication was that if I signed up with his company, I wouldn't get turned in (fined) and would have a system that was legal (his). In an attempt to be the all-American boy, I decided to "get legal" and had the system installed. Besides, none of the employees' music would play in this system. I integrated the company's proprietary eight-hour, continuous-play tape deck into my system. In addition, I had a

commercial sound company install high-quality, flush-mounted speakers in the ceiling, spread evenly throughout the shop. Finally, I could pick the music and it was legal. What could be easier?

My new problem was that the customers could easily get to the music system in the shop, and some customers used the system as their own personal juke box. After hearing the same lonely hearts song twenty times in a five-hour shift, the staff was ready to ... well let's just say, offend the customer. Once my manager Erika sent a customer's favorite tape back to the company (as part of the system package, we could return tired tapes for new selections). The customer got so mad that he swore he would not come back into the shop until she went back to college (six months).

New rule! Never keep the music system out where the customers can "help" choose the music or change the tapes, CDs or stations.

What Works

Now we set up the music system in the back room as we build out a shop. We use commercial satellite, cable, or CD foreground music. Once the system is set up, the employees don't need to maintain them in any way. Most of the foreground music companies have developed excellent music format selections and have become much more affordable than they were when I first signed on.

In case you're wondering whatever happened to the old sheet rock workers' boom box, I still have it. It remains covered in paint and the tape player still doesn't work. I had to borrow a cord from my electric razor after my son (Austin Chase) chewed through the old one when he was three. Now, it's my home office sound system turning out the smooth jazz I need to write my articles.

Please Note: Some pictures or diagrams are only available through the printed media.

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