

THE BUSINESS AND PROFESSIONAL ASPECTS OF RUNNING A STUDIO

A piano teacher is a **professional** in the business of music education. We sell a service (music lessons) to a customer (student). The job requirements extend far beyond teaching however. For independent piano teachers, other considerations include the financial aspects of running a business, secretarial requirements, organization and planning, office needs and equipment, pedagogical materials and equipment, and physical space. Sometimes, we even need to be psychologists! There are also elements of professionalism that affect the growth, development and success of a teacher's business.

The more professionally the business is managed, the more efficient and effective you will be as a teacher. Dealing with these details before you begin teaching will also eliminate unnecessary stress and potential problems, especially if you are self-employed. Gone are the days of the neighborhood piano teacher to whom the children went for lessons with money in hand!

Business Aspects

- **Acquiring students**
 1. **Seek employment with an established school.** This is the easiest solution because the school provides the students.
 2. **Advertise.**
 - a. Put an ad in the local paper.
 - b. Create a flyer to be distributed or displayed in local music stores and/or other businesses. Use locations that have free advertising bulletin boards, such as supermarkets and laundromats or lobby bulletin boards in schools (ask for permission first). Request that music store managers add your name to their list of teachers.
 - c. Write an article about yourself and your qualifications and ask to have it published in a local daily or weekly newspaper. Include the fact that you will be setting up a studio at the beginning of the school year. Many community papers are willing to publish such articles as items of local interest.
 3. **Join the local music teachers association.** These organizations

sometimes keep lists of students who are looking for a teacher. If not, the teachers themselves may have waiting lists that they might be willing to share or might refer calls to you if their schedules are full.

4. **Meet with the music teachers in the local schools** and let them know you are taking new students. Parents often ask school teachers to recommend private teachers.
 5. **Offer to speak about the advantages of music study at nursery schools, churches, and/or service organizations such as Rotary.** This is a good way to let others know about you and what you do without having to advertise.
 6. **Give a public recital and include teaching credentials in your publicity.** Or invite your neighbors to your home for an informal program followed by dessert.
- **Scheduling lessons**
 1. **Decide what days and what hours you will teach and create a grid for scheduling students.** If you do not decide in advance, it is too easy to try to accommodate your students' schedules and end up teaching at times that are not convenient for you.
 - a. Decide whether or not you want to offer lessons of varying lengths (i.e. half hour, 45 minute, or 1 hour lessons) and create appropriate slots on your grid.
 - b. Consider the age of the student when scheduling. It is better to schedule younger students earlier in the day.
 - c. Check school policy regarding release time for private music study. If you can teach during the school day, it will make your scheduling easier. When arranging for release time, be sure the lesson time does not conflict with an important academic class.
 2. **Schedule group sessions (if you plan to offer them) and recitals.** Give as much information as possible in advance to discourage students from scheduling conflicting activities. Try to schedule group sessions at a regular time (i.e. the first Saturday of every month). You can also schedule a workshop with a guest teacher to replace one lesson.

Note: Some teachers offer one group lesson per month in place of the private lesson. This is a good way to work in some time off without losing income.

- 3. Prepare your final schedule.** Check school calendars for holidays and school breaks to coordinate them with your schedule. Decide what other days you want off and when you will take vacations. Indicate all of these on the schedule.

Initially you may need to spend a lot of time on the phone to work out your schedule. After the first year, you will have a starting place based on your previous schedule.

- 4. Include phone numbers and/or email addresses along with the names on your final schedule.** This will allow students to change lessons with someone else, and it will save you many phone hours trying to arrange the changes yourself. It may also help parents who may want to car pool or arrange a ride for their children.

- **Financial Considerations: Income**

- 1. Set Fees.** Some independent teachers are uncomfortable with setting fees and consequently do not charge what they are worth. Remember: *You are a professional* and are providing one-on-one instruction; charging too little devalues what you do. Ironically, parents often believe that teachers who charge higher fees are better teachers!

- a. Decide what to charge per lesson, adjusting the fees proportionately for longer lessons. Consider the socio-economic environment of your community in making your decision. (e.g. a teacher in a rural mid- western town will not be able to charge as much as one in a major metropolitan area.)

Find out what other teachers in you area are charging and do not charge less than they do. If you do, you will alienate them by setting yourself up as their competitor and you will devalue what you do.

- b. Decide what you do about requests for family rates. We recommend that you do not reduce your fee because there is more than one student in a family.
- c. Offer a scholarship if you are aware of extenuating family circumstances and wish to help. Put a time limit on the scholarship so that if circumstances change you can stop awarding it.
- d. Decide how you will handle fees for group sessions or theory

classes if you offer them in addition to lessons.

2. **Set Payment Schedule.** See the following list for options.
 - a. Per Lesson - to be paid at each lesson. NOT RECOMMENDED!
If you choose this method of payment, you will not be paid when students miss a lesson. This makes it extremely difficult, if not impossible, to manage your personal finances because your income will be unpredictable.
 - b. Monthly - either in advance (best) or after the fact.
 - c. Quarterly or by semester – we recommend this method of payment, receiving payment in advance. It reduces the amount of paper work for you as well as the stress of dealing with people who do not pay on time. Have a written policy that lessons stop if payment is not received in full by a particular date.

3. **Set Payment Policy for Missed Lessons and/or Make-up Lessons**
 - a. Student misses lesson
 - (1) Make an exception for long illness or extenuating circumstances (e.g. driving conditions due to weather). We recommend making allowances: either no charge or make-up lessons
 - (2) Reasons other than extenuating circumstances (e.g. schedule conflict, sports, birthday parties, etc.) – either charge for the lesson with no make-up lesson offered or use your make-up lesson policy.
 - b. Make-up lesson policy options:
 - (1) Teacher misses: must offer make-up lesson or refund
 - (2) Student misses: not necessary to make up the lesson
 - (3) Compromise option: use one or two weeks at the end of the term to offer one or two make-up lessons. If the student chooses not to make up the lesson at that time, we recommend that you do not offer alternatives.
 - c. Put your policy in writing and distribute it along with your schedule at the beginning of the teaching year.

4. **Decide how to handle purchasing music and/or other materials required by the student.**
 - a. Purchase materials and re-sell to students. If you choose this option, you must keep accurate records. If you receive a teacher's discount, you must pay tax on any profit.
 - b. Have students purchase their own music and materials. This is the easiest option, but you must make sure the local music store has the materials available.
 - c. Include a materials fee in your tuition. The disadvantage with this option is that you may have to deal with credits for overpayment or bill for underpayment at the end of the teaching year.

 5. **Set policy for how fees are to be paid.**
 - a. Give due dates in advance and post notices in your studio when they are due as reminders.
 - b. Send bills or include due dates for payment on the schedules you distribute.
 - c. Decide how to deal with late payments.
 - (1) Charge interest
 - (2) Discontinue lessons
- **Financial Considerations: Expenses**
 1. **Insurance**
 - a. If self-employed, you will need health insurance.
 - b. Consider purchasing disability insurance. If a health issue comes up that forces you to stop teaching for an extended period of time, you will need some source of income. Check into professional organizations in which you are a member for group disability rates.

- c. If you teach in your own studio, liability insurance is necessary to offer you protection if someone gets injured on your property. It is relatively inexpensive.

2. Studio expenses

- a. Maintenance for the pianos
- b. An adjustable piano bench
- c. Footstools and seat cushions for young students
- d. Studio rent if applicable
- e. Telephone, answering machine, fax machine, copier, computer and software
- f. Reference materials: music, recordings, books, periodicals, etc.
- g. Office supplies: paper, envelopes, pencils, pens, postage, etc.

3. Miscellaneous Personal Expenses

- a. Professional membership dues
- b. Relevant workshops, courses, and/or private study
- c. Business travel, lodging, meals and/or other incidentals related to travel

- **Legal Responsibilities**

1. Record Keeping

- a. Keep accurate records of all income. Income must be reported to the government on tax forms. Failure to report income is illegal.
- b. Keep track of expenses and save receipts. Most expenses are tax deductible. We recommend setting up a monthly ledger to list expenses. Deductible items include:
 - (1) Studio rent and utilities. If you teach at home, you may deduct the business related portion of your utilities.

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- (2) Reference materials: books, magazines, recordings, music
 - (3) Office supplies: paper, pens & pencils, envelopes, postage, stickers & incentives, etc.
 - (4) Telephone – the business related portion only.
 - (5) Equipment and maintenance: Computers, computer software, electric keyboards, printer, copy machine, fax machine, answering machine piano tuning and repair, metronome, etc.
 - (6) Membership dues for professional organizations
 - (7) Workshops, private lessons and courses
 - (8) Business travel (state the purpose of your trip) – including air fare, car mileage (check the annual legal deductible rate) or rental, lodging, meals, incidentals related to travel (taxi or limo, etc.)
 - (9) Child care
2. **Income Tax – Pay all taxes required.** These include federal, state or provincial, and county, city or local. You may need make estimated tax payments four times a year. Check on tax laws or consult a tax advisor.
 3. **Social Security or Social Insurance taxes.** If you are self-employed you must make payments along with your estimated taxes. If you have employees, see an accountant or tax lawyer.
 4. **Check on local zoning laws or homeowner association rules and regulations.** If you are self- employed and teach in your home, you may be required to get a license or zoning approval.
- **Secretarial Responsibilities**
 1. **Keep a record of income.** This includes payments for lessons, music, etc.
 2. **Communication**
 - a. Telephoning. We recommend purchasing an answering machine.

- (1) Return all calls from prospective clients promptly.
 - (2) Give parents or students with questions convenient times to call you or include a phone hour on your policy statement (Reserve one hour per day for receiving calls).
- b. E-mail. We recommend using email to communicate with students or parents whenever possible. This will save you a great deal of time.
- c. Policy letter. Distribute to parents or students at the beginning of the teaching year. Include your schedule (with phone numbers and email addresses), vacation dates, group lesson dates, recital dates, fees with due dates, make-up lesson policy, policy about missed lessons and any other information they need.

3. Planning Lessons

- a. Prepare for each student. See Part V: *Planning and Teaching Lessons*. Knowing goals will help you focus on the skills the student needs to develop and plan lessons appropriately. Planning also allows you to have the music that is needed available.
- b. Keep track of what music books a student already has. The same music may be used for siblings.

Professional Aspects

- **Personal Appearance**

1. **Clothing should be neat and clean.** If you look like a professional, you will be treated like a professional.
2. **Pay attention to hygiene.** Be especially aware of body odor or bad breath.

- **Teaching Studio**

1. **Must be neat and clean.** The condition of your studio reflects an attitude.
2. **Essential teaching equipment:**

- a. Piano must be tuned and in good condition. Remember to wash the keys regularly.
 - b. The piano bench and foot rest must be adjustable to accommodate all ages and sizes.
 - c. A chair near the piano for the parent.
 - d. Teaching supplies (i.e. pencils, *Scramble* cards, stickers, flash cards, metronome, notebook and paper). Keep them within easy reach.
3. **Useful, but non-essential equipment:** computer and software, printer, copy machine, fax and answering machine, file cabinets or shelves for music.
4. **Create a favorable working climate.**
- a. Eliminate or control distractions such (e.g. telephone, pets, interruptions)
 - b. Set aside an area with some toys or books for siblings or request that parents hire a baby sitter.
5. **Access to a restroom** is an important consideration, especially if you teach in your own home.
6. **Access to the studio.** Having sufficient parking space, especially if you give group classes, is essential.
- **Community Involvement**
1. **Connect with other musicians.** Phone them and introduce yourself or invite them to lunch.
 2. **Attend local concerts and recitals.**
 3. **Join community organizations** (e.g. church, synagogue, YMCA, Service clubs such Rotary) to broaden your network and find potential students.
 4. **Perform as a soloist or accompanist.** E.g. offer to play for local theater, chorale groups, or for school music teachers.

5. **Volunteer to have your students perform** at nursing homes, hospitals, Senior centers or for special gatherings held by local organizations.
- **Professional Development**
 1. **Join national, state or provincial, and local music associations.**
 2. **Attend workshops, seminars, institutes, and relevant lectures.**
 3. **Take courses and/or private lessons.**
 4. **Read books on music, teaching, psychology or self-improvement.**
 5. **Subscribe to music magazines.**
 6. **Go to concerts and listen to recordings.**
 - **Professional Ethics**
 1. **Promote positive relationships with your colleagues.**
 - a. Never speak negatively about another teacher.
 - b. Do not seek out students already studying with another teacher.
 - c. If students request a change to you, discuss the request with their teacher and ask the student to do the same.
 - d. Have the confidence and wisdom to know when to send your students on to another teacher. Outgrowing you is a supreme compliment!
 - e. Respect other teachers and their work. You are not without faults even if you think you are more qualified. You do not know where that student started or how far he/she has come. The teacher may also be nurturing special needs of that student, and these are often more important than learning to play the piano.
 - f. Make other teachers your allies and friends. Socialize with them, invite them to concerts or workshops with you and ask for their help. It is also a good idea to coordinate recitals or workshops with them so that your schedule does not compete with theirs.