

# Educators rally against “big box” instrument sales

**T**housands of shiny new band instruments in cute cases and eye-catching packaging were sold by big-box retailers last year. Seeing an opportunity to sell into this market, the big boxes (Costco, Wal-Mart, Sam's Club, etc) found offshore suppliers and sold many of these instruments to parents and students around the U.S. They saw an opportunity to profit by “supplying another widget in a carton.”

What the big boxes didn't realize is that these musical instruments are referred to by those in the know as Instrument Shaped Object (ISO's) and require adjustments and service that can only be handled by specialists. They didn't know that one little bump could make these off-brand instruments unplayable. They didn't know that some of these instruments are virtually irreparable. They didn't know that local educators have supplied students and parents for many years with lists of brand name instruments that have good track records of working in the hands of 11-year-olds.

But the Big Boxes seem to be learning these lessons now.

Costco did more than \$40 billion in sales last year; a very small fraction of that revenue came from the school music market. Its 320 U.S. locations in 38 states sold First Act brand band instruments. Citing high return rates, service problems, pressure from customers, legal issues and a variety of other factors, the musical instrument buyer at Costco recently told us that the

chain will not be selling band instruments in 2004. This is a major success for music education, and it also happens to be good news for local music retailers.

“These big box stores don't want to see returns on products. They operate with extremely low margins, and when they see any kind of trend with product returns, these products usually become discontinued rather quickly,” says retail expert Sam Shane.

## Community Partners

Many big boxes make extraordinary efforts to ingratiate themselves with local communities. To offset the impression that their presence will undermine local retailers and replace higher-paying jobs with minimum wages, community public relations has become a vital part of the big box business model. Wal-Mart has given \$80 million in scholarships since 1979. In 2003, Wal-Mart contributed over \$40 million to education programs.

Part of Wal-Mart's printed philosophy reads as follows: “We can make the greatest impact on communities by supporting issues and causes that are important to our customers and associates in their own neighborhoods. We rely on our associates to know which organizations are the most important to their hometowns, and we empower them to determine how Wal-Mart Foundation dollars will be spent. Consequently, our funding initiatives are channeled directly into local communities by associates who live there.”

So with local education and communi-

ty relations being such important issues for big box stores, it's only natural that they will be very sensitive to the suggestion that they are hurting education by supplying troublesome products. When educators visit local big boxes (see sidebar) and educate the managers about musical instruments in friendly terms, often the big box can and will simply return any sub-quality merchandise they may have to their distribution center.

Mike Blakeslee, deputy executive director of The National Association for Music Education (MENC), says, “By working together, local educators and school music dealers can expect to win big victories in the effort to keep quality instruments in the hands of our kids.” •

## How big boxes work

**High volume and few returns. What keeps these mega-store chains very popular among consumers are the consistent low prices they offer on staple goods and commodity products.**

**In order to manage enterprises at such a large scale, centralized inventory management becomes a make-or-break science. Sophisticated computer software tracks what SKUs sell in which stores and often profiles the types of customers who shop there. Usually the main office decides what each store will sell based on this data-driven analysis, and there is very little input from the individual store's management.**

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## Educators can take action to make a difference

Educators are the key in keeping local big box retailers away from selling poorly made musical instruments. Local educators need to form a team of two or three directors from area schools, or two directors and one school principal.

This “committee” will need to be proactive. Your local music retailer may offer encouragement and support, but the task at hand is ultimately yours.

1.) One of the members of your educator committee should call the local big box store that is or was selling ISO's and ask to arrange a meeting with its manager. Most big boxes have several managers, and some have separate department managers who handle band instruments (in the case of Wal-Mart, the Optics department is primarily responsible for band instruments), so your committee member should ask specifically for the manager who handles musical instruments. The educator should say something like “Hi, I'm the band director at XYZ middle school. I have some questions regarding the musical instruments that you have been selling, and I would like to arrange a meeting to discuss the issue. What day and time will you be available?”

2.) Once a meeting is arranged, the educator needs to pull together their team of two or three teachers and head off to the meeting together. Very important: This is a friendly introduction and not a confrontation of any type.

3.) After you arrive, let the big box manager know that you didn't think they'd mind if you brought along a few of your peers and introduce each person. Hopefully you can find a quiet space, and let them know you'll just need five minutes or so.

4.) Warm them up. Tell the manager you understand that their store is responsible for a wide variety of products and that it must be overwhelming at times managing the inventory. Tell them that your education and specialty is musical instruments for beginner students. Tell them how many students are in your program and invite the manager (give them tickets) to your next concert.

5.) Let the manager know that you are having a difficult time teaching students who show up with poorly made instruments. Some find them on eBay, some from attics, and unfortunately some have purchased from this store. Your duty is to educate the store management about these educational products on your students' behalf. Because we all want the students to do well and have a good experience in music.

6.) You wanted to be sure the manager is aware that:

- You know they are committed to education in this community and that is reassuring to all of you.
- Band instruments are finicky and almost always require adjustments out of the box to make them play properly.
- Some instrument brands are difficult to repair, and many local repairmen won't touch them.
- Inexpensive instruments can go out of adjustment much easier than better-made instruments. This is a big problem, because often children will blame themselves and stop playing, drop out of the band, and quit music entirely.
- Until the store can service the products it sells, or guarantee a better-quality instrument, you cannot recommend these products to your students and must ask that the store stops selling them. After all, nobody wants a student to quit music over a faulty instrument.
- You know you're asking a lot for them to do this, but it is for the better of your community's music programs.

7.) If you don't get an immediate “Okay, I see the problem, thanks for bringing it to my attention, we'll send these instruments back,” then be sure to let them know that you have heard that many big stores that tried to sell these kinds of instruments in the past have stopped for these very reasons. Cite as an example the fact that the entire Costco's chain has chosen to get out of the band instrument business – to the advantage of both Costco and school music programs nationwide. •

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