

Your Teaching Studio

Essential Steps To Building A Successful Business

by Jeff Salem



I've owned and operated a music school for the past six years. Prior to that I taught percussion lessons at a local store for twelve years. When I decided to start my own teaching practice, my first thought was, *If I were just starting to learn drums, where would I want to go for lessons?* This article outlines the steps I took to address that question while establishing my private-lesson business.

Location, Location, Location

The first thing I had to do was find a suitable place for my teaching studio that potential students wouldn't have difficulty finding—perhaps in an area close to a highway exit. I then had to consider my options of renting a commercial space versus purchasing my own property. My top priority was to make sure that my studio was a comfortable place for my students, so I decided to purchase a larger home that had a sizeable basement that could be used for my teaching business. I needed a separate entrance so students wouldn't have to walk through the main house, and I needed ample parking for students and their parents. It was very important that the studio didn't interfere with my personal living quarters.

Your Mission Statement

Once I settled on where to house my teaching practice, I created a name—Jeff Salem's Music Studio—and wrote a mission statement for my business: "Teaching the art of music to all ages in an inspirational and motivating setting and style." The purpose of this mission statement is to send the message that students who study at my studio will enjoy their private lessons as much as they enjoy any other hobby. Students should *want* to take

lessons, rather than being told by their parents that they *have* to take lessons.

To achieve that level of enthusiasm and excitement for learning, students need to feel good about coming to my studio and studying music. Along those lines, the first thing I did was make space for a comfortable lounge area for parents and students to wait in while I finished up other lessons. The area includes a television and video games. The sofas are soft, and I painted the walls with soothing colors. I also hung artwork that helped create a cozy feel. The decor is important because I don't want my students to feel as if they're in a boring, sterile waiting room at a doctor's office.

Full-Service Studios

For my lesson rooms, I felt it was important to have plenty of space, and I wanted to soundproof the walls with top-of-the-line materials—no egg crates or old mattresses. My rooms contain two drumsets (for the teacher and student), a full PA system for listening and playing along to CDs and iPods, Internet access, and a resource of books. I also have the ability to film and record lessons so that students can take home a DVD to review for the next week.

Finding Students

After I completed the design and setup of my teaching studio, my energies shifted toward seeking out students. As a freelance drumset clinician, I had developed a rapport with music teachers at various high schools near my home in Toronto. I had also facilitated drum circle programs at local day-care centers, corporate events, and private parties. Through these interactive programs, I was able to connect with a large number of potential students. To

entice them to study with me privately, I offered a free introductory lesson at Jeff Salem's Music Studio. This proved to be so successful right off the bat that I actually had to find additional teachers to help me cover all of the free lessons. The incentive I used with these freelance instructors was that if a student decided to enroll for a month of study, they would be paid for that initial trial lesson.

Structured Course Of Study

It was important for me to develop a structured program of study so that parents and students could see progress each week. I also wanted to give them a clear outline of the levels of study that needed to be implemented in order to achieve the greatest results. To do that, I created a multi-stage format that's similar to the colored-belt system used in martial arts. In my program, each skill level has a corresponding method book that students must master before moving to the next level. Beginning students start with the introductory white-belt book, and then they work through seven other colors until they reach the black level.

Within each level there's plenty of room for students to branch out, mainly by learning songs and styles that excite them and match their current playing ability. This is essential in keeping students interested in continuing onward. Before they can progress to the next color level, I videotape them playing to songs. If they exhibit mastery of the techniques and skills needed to play the material correctly, they graduate to the next book.

At the end of each completed level, a student gets two DVDs. One disc contains the lessons I taught at that level, and the other features that person's

performances of the required songs. The DVDs provide a great way for students to share what they have accomplished with friends and family.

Branching Out

Within the first year of opening Jeff Salem's Music Studio, I had more than forty students signed up to study with me and another instructor. Over time, more and more parents began asking if I offered lessons for other instruments, such as guitar and piano. I hadn't considered offering anything other than drum lessons, so I initially referred the parents to other schools. But I found that they weren't signing up elsewhere. Instead, they often said something like, "We'll just wait until you expand, because we'd like to do all of our family's lessons in one place."

I eventually decided to enlarge my business to accommodate the parents and students who wanted to study other instruments. The first step I took was asking parents and students to sign a request list, to give me an idea of how many people wanted to take lessons on other instruments. I discovered that I

had at least ten potential students who were interested in guitar lessons, so I sought out a professional, experienced, and reliable guitar instructor. Once the guitar program was implemented, an interest in piano and vocal lessons soon emerged, so I looked for qualified teachers in those areas as well.

Spreading The Word

After following many different avenues to increase enrollment—newspaper and Yellow Pages advertising, flyers, and so on—I found that the most effective ways to get more students were to conduct regular clinics and performances at local schools, to have an informative website, and to request referrals from schoolteachers, other students, and parents of current students.

Your website is very important. It doesn't have to be flashy, but it must include lesson policies and rates; photos of you, your teachers, and your studios; bios of all your instructors; your email address and phone number; and any other pertinent information about your business.

Progress Reports

Toward the end of each spring, I offer a recital for all students who wish to participate. This allows students, parents, and teachers to build a solid community. I choose a professional venue near my studio, and I hire a backing band of local pros to play with my students. These events are great opportunities for students to showcase all of their hard work.

I also provide students with a biannual report card. This type of evaluation informs them of their strengths as well as areas that need improvement.

You Can Do It!

I'm currently in my seventh year of operating Jeff Salem's Music Studio, and the business has grown to include six teachers and more than 150 students taking weekly private lessons. I'm very thankful to my teachers and students—after all, there's nothing more rewarding than seeing students progress while enjoying the process of making music. I wish you the best of luck!

For more on Jeff Salem's Music Studio, visit jsmusicstudio.com.



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