



Paper: Ann Arbor News (MI)

Title: Finding the key to success

In tune with customers for 45 years, King's outlasts competitors

Date: April 16, 2006

News Business Reporter

The piano was a bright, glossy red. Nearly 50 people enjoyed wine, cheese and crackers while famed Detroit pianist Johnny O'Neal's fingers whisked across the ivory keys.

Choosing to sit in a folding chair near the back of the store, Dick King looked almost embarrassed by the crowd gathered to toast him. He politely thanked everyone, although it seemed he would rather listen to O'Neal than talk about himself.

The party was his public retirement celebration, held at **King's Keyboard** House in Ann Arbor last week. King has owned **King's** - which sells new and used pianos, **keyboards** and accessories - since 1961 and will turn the business over to two of his seven children May 31.

Julie King and Jim King plan to split the business into **King's Keyboard** and Julie's Music, which will sell sheet music less than a block away.

Over the years, **King's** has outlasted 28 other piano and music shops that have come and gone, said Jim King. Indeed, today **King's** is the only piano shop in Ann Arbor.

Customer comes first

The secret of **King's** success, friends and family say, lies in his quiet and calm personality, his passion for music and penchant for being a customer-oriented, upstanding businessman.

"We treat others like we would want to be treated," the 82-year-old, gray-haired man says simply when asked about the longevity of the business. He nods, purses his lips and doesn't say much more. He doesn't need to.

Traveling man

King grew up in a fairly nonmusical family - he was the youngest of six - but still got his start in music as a child.

His uncle was a violinist and piano tuner. "He was the only one in my family with a talent for music," King said, recalling the piano lessons his uncle gave him at the age of 9.

"I liked it. I guess I had some talent," he chuckled.

When he left his hometown of Tahlequah, Okla., to attend the University of Oklahoma, **King's** vision was to be a band director. Two years into school, he was drafted into the U.S. Army during World War II.

There, **King's** musical ability served him quite well.

Instead of joining the infantry, King was assigned to the Army's touring Rainbow Division Band. He played clarinet and saxophone and also did arrangements.

The 56-piece band was stationed in Oklahoma and played for military ceremonies and benefits to urge civilians to buy war bonds. Eventually, the group went to Europe.

King spent three years in the Army and 15 months abroad. While on a furlough, he came to Ann Arbor to visit his sister and met his future wife, Patricia. After the war, he transferred to the University of Michigan to study music theory and got married. The couple will celebrate their 60th anniversary this June.

"At that point I wanted to go into composition, arranging, whatever," King said.

King got his master's degree and spent time teaching private piano lessons locally. He began selling pianos for

Grinnell's in Ypsilanti, where he stayed for 10 years.

All the while, he had a nagging thought. An inkling.

"I thought, I could do a better job than Grinnell's," King said. After receiving an inheritance, he left Grinnell's and started **King's Keyboard** in downtown Ann Arbor with just three pianos and three electric organs.

Music entrepreneur

Things were slow at first, until King began carrying Baldwin pianos. "It was very competitive at the time, and at first a lot of other stores had better pianos than I had."

Pianos then sold from \$600 and up. Today, that range starts closer to \$3,000 and up.

His kids would help at the store on the weekends. Julie King recalls coming in to empty wastebaskets. Jim King remembers washing windows, cleaning and dusting.

King's

moved from Liberty Street to Main Street and back again before going to 2333 E. Stadium 10 years ago. For two years, he operated a store in Toledo.

King said he was lucky to sell one piano a week at times. Today, Jim King said, it's not unusual to sell 10 a week.

Some of the store's first customers became friends who still visit.

Tom Hill met King in 1963. They used to play together on a 9-foot concert Baldwin grand piano, Hill recalled. "We'd have a cup of coffee and we dearly loved playing that piano," he said.

That was, until King lent it to the University of Michigan for a Rod Stewart concert, where the band smashed the instrument to bits at the end of the show.

Now Hill does repair work for the store. One of the reasons **King's** has survived so long, Hill says, is because of Dick **King's** unwavering concern for customers and quality products - a trait some say is lost on today's entrepreneurs.

"Dick doesn't want a piano to go out of this store unless it's near perfect," said Hill. "He has a philosophy that he wants to exceed customers' expectations. It's something that is not common at all today."

"I always feel like if I purchase something from **King's**, they are going to give me a good price," said Cheryl Wiker, owner of Ivory League Piano Studio in Ypsilanti and a 10-year **King's** customer.

Honoring traditions

Julie King and Jim King say they will continue their dad's philosophy when they take over.

"We'd rather lose money on a sale than have a customer unhappy," Jim King said.

The split of the company into two entities was fairly natural, as Julie King became respected for her knowledge in sheet music and the same happened for Jim King when it came to selling instruments.

Although she worked at the store during high school, Julie King was the first to join her dad full time in business in 1983 at his Toledo store.

Julie's Music is set to open in early May at 2361 E. Stadium Blvd. and will focus on sheet music including piano and band teaching methods, popular, jazz, Broadway, classical piano and vocal music.

Before joining the business, Jim King traveled around the country playing in different bands including Masquerade, King Cool and the Automatics. He started at the store in 1987.

King's, whose main brand is Yamaha, has been running big sales to clear out as much merchandise as possible so Jim King can start fresh with his own inventory. The store will continue to rent out its studios.

As for the patriarch, King said he'll spend more time in Florida, golf, read and visit family after he retires.

King feels good about his children carrying on the family business, and he says it's because of their hard work that it'll go on.

More than 90 percent of all businesses in the U.S. are family owned, and nearly 35 percent of Fortune 500

companies are family firms, according to the Family Business Forum at the University of North Carolina Asheville.

Only about 30 percent of all family-owned businesses survive into the second generation; 12 percent make it into the third generation, and 3 percent are viable at the fourth generation.

"There are a lot of really great things about working together, but we have differences," Julie King said. "My father hasn't cut us a lot of slack, he's made us prove ourselves ... but at my parent's house, I'm a daughter again."

Dick King decided to retire because the lease was coming up for renewal, he was ready, and it coincided nicely with his wedding anniversary.

"I feel 45 years is good enough," King said.

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