Small Business Music Schools' Shift to Tech

Every bit of me is devoted to love and art. And I aspire to try to be a teacher to my young fans who feel just like I felt when I was younger … I'm trying to liberate them, I want to free them of their fears and make them feel that they can make their own space in the world. (Lady Gaga)

Music artists are passionate folks – not only the professionals but also those working to perfect their craft. Some of the latter aspire to make it big one day, but overwhelmingly they play because they love it and they want to share that joy with others. Along with their regular day jobs, many musicians perform at clubs and private or community events on the weekends. They even teach lessons weekday evenings to earn money while continuing to do what they love. For some, teaching is a side gig. For others who own their own brick and mortar music schools, teaching IS their day job.

Although sometimes referred to as store-front music schools, we coined the term, small business music schools or SBMS', to refer to these brick and mortar establishments. This tag better acknowledges and values the seriousness, effort and time the owners put into their businesses and the monies they continually reinvest to make them successful. But this work has been seriously disrupted since COVID-19 arrived.

Even long-established schools have been struggling to adapt to the new economic conditions. What had been working all these years was suddenly no longer viable. The circumstances brought on by COVID-19 required owners to pivot their business models on a dime. They had to shift their lessons from traditional in-person to virtual instruction overnight. Some schools lacked the connectivity and software technologies to do this. Others seamlessly transitioned their lessons to video platforms using computer programs or smartphone apps.

We wondered about the technological readiness of SBMS' now that they were faced with the challenges presented by physical distance and PPE measures to keep everyone safe. We also wondered how the shift in lesson delivery strategies impacted their respective missions and brands. Using information from their websites between May 1st and May 15th, approximately six weeks into the COVID-19 shutdown, we profiled 30 schools across Illinois, focusing on their mission statements and lesson delivery options. Below is what we found on their virtual readiness and its consistency with the stated missions and goals for their schools. To convey their importance, let us begin with a look at the role these schools serve in communities.

The Role of SBMS'

Many SBMS' exist in communities with large numbers of children because these are their target students. If 16-year old Bobby wants to supplement his band practices with private saxophone lessons, or Mom wants 7-year old Janie to learn to play piano, or 13-year old Susan wants to add drums to her repertoire, these schools usually offer lessons for that.

In addition to jump-starting kids' music education, most SBMS' also offer opportunities for adults to learn an instrument they have always wanted to play. These schools are especially needed in neighborhoods where band programs are virtually non-existent in the local elementary and high schools. Here, young students are so rarely exposed to live music that they do not see playing an instrument as a possibility.

> *About 13-14 years ago, I went back to my alma mater, Fairfax High School, and ran into the music teacher. She invited me to come speak to the kids about the viability of a music career. When I went into the room where I used to play every day in a big orchestra, they had nothing! (Flea - of Red Hot Chili Peppers)*

Even in communities with schools that have advanced band or music programs, SBMS' supplement this learning with private lessons or on-stage performances. Often, the groups are smaller, and the music is of a different genre than that performed by the students' school concert and marching bands. Together, these indicate that SBMS' fill gaps in music education. They make it accessible to those who ordinarily would not see playing and performing as possibilities. And they strengthen the talents and skills of those who have some musical experience and access to resources. Thus, SBMS' play a pivotal role in communities, filling voids where music resources are scarce as well as supplementing the training and experiences offered in elementary and high-school music programs.

We recently learned that a long-standing SBMS shuttered because it could not survive the financial stress brought on by the crisis. It is a sobering reminder of a couple of things: 1) the importance of realizing who SBMS customers are, and 2) the importance of technology in maintaining the viability of small businesses.

SBMS Customers

While kids comprise the overwhelming majority of SBMS students, it is actually the parents who are the schools' customers. It is they who have to agree to the program and to pay the tuition. We found that only a few schools articulated this understanding on their websites. In a flyer of their program, School of Rock wrote, "…[our] experienced instructors are passionate about creating a legacy of music for the future by helping your kids succeed in music and beyond." The use of your kids indicates the school is keenly aware that the parents are their customers. But with many parents now laid off or furloughed, there is little if any money left for music lessons; yet the schools' monthly leases, equipment payments and utility bills must be paid. For those parents who can still afford lessons, the schools need technology to make it work.

Importance of Technology

Mission/Goals

While many small business music schools focus on music for enjoyment and sharing, some adopt a structured approach to develop students' understanding of music and proper technique. Still others are about learning to play and get on stage quickly. Given these differences, the schools were divided into four segments based on the mission statements or goals found on their websites. Some schools explicitly provided mission statements, but many made only general mentions about goals or their approaches. We interpreted these to convey the schools' aims, and thus combined them under the header, mission/goals.
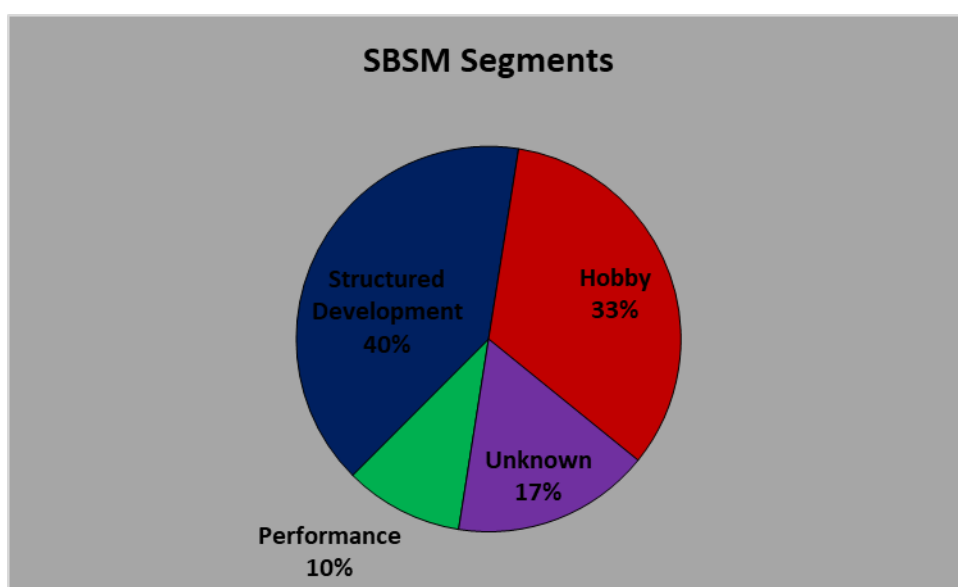
One-third of the schools were in the Hobby segment, which aims to transmit music for enjoyment and sharing. Structured Development consists of schools that focus on musicianship such as music theory, tonality, note reading, and technique. Clear and emphatic about their end-goal, the Performance segment is laser-focused on stage performance, learning speed and creativity. Finally, the mission of the Unknown segment could not be discerned from the information in their content.

School Profiles

The overwhelming majority of the schools were for-profit businesses established more than 12 years ago. The breadth of instruments taught varied across the segments. Suffice it to say that each school had game, offering instruction in more than nine instruments. Guitar, piano, drums, and bass were most common, but orchestral brass and strings were also quite popular. Additionally, the bios of most staff members indicated they were formally trained in music.

Given the schools' longevity, we were surprised to find so few testimonials from parents and/or students' attesting to their experiences and accomplishments, respectively. A business' credibility is its currency, so in theory these endorsements could go a long way in promoting the school and enhancing the value of its brand. Nearly all of them, however, do have a social media presence on multiple channels. The most popular of which were Facebook and YouTube.

	Number of Schools	Pct For Profit	Avg Age of School (years)	Avg Social Media Channels	Avg Number of Instruments Taught	Pct with Testimonials On Website	Pct also Offering Adult Lessons
Performance	3	33%	24	3	5	33%	100%
Structured Development	12	100%	12	3	11	33%	83%
Hobby	10	90%	12	3	12	50%	70%
Unknown	5	100%	16	4	9	80%	80%

Virtual Readiness

The chart below indicates technological readiness by segment and the degree to which they varied. Some segments were better prepared than others for shifting to online operations. This is evident in the proportion of schools within the segment that already had a virtual strategy integrated into their everyday operations. Many were already complementing in-person lessons with online lessons through technologies such as Zoom and Skype. This allowed them to transition to online quickly and seamlessly when the pandemic hit.

Those in Ad-Hoc Technology Strategy cobbled together technologies to offer virtual lessons. For example, one school indicated it was "transitioning to online." Another noted "we have become virtuosic users of Zoom, FaceTime, Skype, and Messenger." The comments suggest the schools were dealing with learning curves, set-up delays and coordination issues, but they were fighting through it to continue to serve their students.

In all, 2/3rd of the schools now have a virtual strategy in place for student learning, while the remaining have yet to indicate an implementation. Based on the absence of information on their sites regarding virtual or online lessons, these schools, noted in No Technology Strategy, were unable to make the shift.

	Total	Virtual Readiness			Mission/Goals	
		Integrated Technology Strategy	Ad-hoc Technology Strategy	No Technology Strategy		
Performance	3	1	2	-	Performance, Learning speed and Creativity	*...we get kids playing on stage as quickly as possible.* *[We are the] most advanced and accelerated learning guitar program ANYWHERE.* *To integrate musical creativity into everyday life through..*
Structured Development	12	3	5	4	Musicianship - music theory, tonality, note reading, technique, etcetera	*[We] recognized gaps in traditional teaching methods... We develop the whole musician, one who listens and reflects as they learn.* *Our curriculum is carefully developed to meet the standards of excellence in music [to] develop strong performance and technical skills [and] a thorough understanding of musical theory.* *Our goal is to provide quality instruction, emphasizing proper technique and…music theory.*
Hobby	10	*1*	7	2	Enjoyment and Sharing	*..to provide people of all ages and abilities the tools to have a life long love of music.* *..to use the power of music to nourish one's heart, mind and soul.* *..to build and cultivate community through shared experiences in the arts.*
Unknown	5	*0*	1	4	Unknown	*...a plan that fits your needs and musical preferences.* *We provide musical instruction to anyone… so they can have their own musical adventures.* *Harnessing your child's potential and bringing music education closer to your home.*

Summary

Performance
The Performance segment was much better positioned for the sudden pandemic than the remaining three, given that each school already had or was able to implement a virtual strategy. To be fair though, this segment consists of only three schools. It can also be considered an outlier because of its unique resources. For example, one school is a very large, very well-funded and diversified organization, which even showcases performances of original works by its students. Another was able to quickly launch a "secure video technology" solution, simultaneously addressing parents' concerns about privacy and minimizing any disruption to its operations. This school, however, is a franchise backed by a company that has 60 locations worldwide and boasts 30,000 students in total. So, while this school contains an enrollment comparable to typical SBMS', it has the backing of an affluent and resourceful organization. The likelihood of this school and the others in this segment being forced to abandon their mission of speedy learning, musical creativity, and performance is minimal.

Structured Development
Schools in the Structured Development segment were fairly well-positioned for this sudden pandemic, although a good portion of them have been impacted. More than a month into the state's shutdown, 1/3rd of schools had not made the shift from in-person to virtual lessons. On the bright side though, a quarter of the schools in the segment already had virtual platforms integrated into their businesses. Shifting all lesson operations to virtual was relatively seamless for these schools.

Just over forty percent of the schools in the segment were able to at least pivot to virtual technologies that allowed them to deliver on their missions. In total, 2/3rd of the schools became technologically able to adhere to their mission to develop the student's musical theory ability, technique, and tonality with little interruption.

Hobby
Seventy percent of the Hobby segment was able to launch virtual lessons using Zoom, Skype, FaceTime, Facebook Messenger, and perhaps other tools not mentioned on their sites. Two of the ten schools in the segment were unable to implement a virtual technology strategy. Despite this, the segment fared well, demonstrating its ability to pivot to technology as an alternative mode of lesson delivery.

Perhaps there is something to be said for the mission of enjoyment and sharing of music. Perhaps this translated to collaboration and sharing of technology know-how among owners and staff. Perhaps this facilitated their ability to devise a strategy that allowed them to continue to use music to nourish minds and souls and cultivate community – especially when it was needed most.

Unknown
Four of the five schools in the Unknown segment appeared unable to make remote learning a reality. The lack of clear mission and neither integrated nor virtual strategy suggest a refocus is needed to

strengthen this segment's ability to compete. Such areas of focus include formal development of a mission, expansion of technological knowledge and budget allocation for technology resources.

Conclusion

Undoubtedly, each of the segments lost students, at least temporarily, while they shifted to technologies that allowed them to teach along the lines of their respective missions. The schools already fit with virtual technology were able to tighten the neck of the funnel and minimize the loss. These were businesses that articulated clear missions for their schools and actionable goals for their students. Faced with the COVID-19 pandemic, they were positioned to seamlessly resume fulfilling their missions to focus on creativity and learning speed, and the development of musicianship.

This was also the case for other schools in the Performance and Structured Development segments that had to quickly adopt ad-hoc technologies. Such technologies enable execution of the missions and goals of their respective segments. Thus, this connection between clarity of mission and virtual readiness is manifested in the business' outcomes.

This is not so much the case with SBMS' in the Hobby segment. It is difficult to cultivate community through shared experiences when the technological platform is not in place for this when meeting in person is not prudent. It is difficult to deliver on the mission to provide the best musical experience possible by using the most up to date methods and technology when these are not in place for this to occur. And it is tough to deliver on the promise of a pleasurable environment to experience the joy of music when that environment is not virtually recreated. So here, the mission/goals and technology are out of synch and strategic thinking is in order. Lessons have continued for most schools in the segment. But the degree to which they can deliver on the experiences promised is severely constrained.

Business consultants often emphasize mission in the development of business plans. This is because it translates to an enhanced focus on ensuring the business is structured with that mission always top of mind.

We wonder if these findings suggest a need for SBMS' and perhaps small businesses in general to focus much more heavily on their mission/goal statements. Perhaps, we really need to think hard and write and rewrite and rewrite again what we stand for and what we want our businesses to be. It seems important given the results here. Clarity of mission is indeed associated with business preparedness, and ultimately business outcomes.