

| BY ALEX HARRELL |

KEEPING IT SIMPLE

Chicago Music Exchange isn't reinventing the wheel, just reshaping it to fit consumers' ever-changing demands

It's no secret that Chicago Music Exchange (CME) is one of the hottest retailers in the Windy City. Musicians and tourists alike flock to the 30,000-square-foot shop on Chicago's North Side to gawk at the beautiful display of guitars and basses lining the overgrown walls.

"The store is still the coolest music shop I've visited in the U.S.," said one voting retailer. "People shop at CME for the atmosphere and the experience as much as the product."

What's not so obvious, however, is the totally simple reason behind the shop's massive success: passion.

"Everyone here loves what we have created together and are passionate about reaching new people," said CEO Andrew Yonke.

CME was founded just over 25 years ago, and since day one the company's priority has been to provide quality service to customers no matter who they are — "rock stars and beginners alike." Yonke, who took over CME in January of 2016, oversees all day-to-day operations. "The work of the team here is what has made it into the destination that it is today," he said.

And keeping CME a destination shop isn't as effortless as customers may think. "We're always watching the floor layout," Yonke explained. By keeping certain displays static — such as the Rickenbacker wall and the Gibson Les Paul wall — the team can have and take more creative liberties with the ever-changing product lines.

"In general, we have so many product lines — especially with guitars and basses — that we need to rotate it to keep it fresh and draw attention to new collections," Yonke said. CME's sales team is responsible for keeping inventory moving and coordinating the window displays that are changed quarterly and seasonally.

Voters continue to nominate CME for Retail Excellence — some selecting it for the second or third year in a row.

"The quality of the original content is second to none," said one voter. "Their knowledge of product

and passion for the industry is so clear to the consumer that it automatically give them credibility, and has made them the go-to music store from all corners of the country."

K.I.S.S. & Go

What is the secret to said success? K.I.S.S., according to Yonke, which stands for: Keep It Simple, Stupid.

"You don't need to recreate the wheel," he said. "We have a store full of amazing and unique instruments with an equally as amazing and unique team; capture any combination of that properly and release it out there to the world."

Utilizing the correct social media platforms doesn't hurt, either. Social media has changed significantly and will continue to do so, Yonke said. "Instagram is a really great platform for us, and our

YouTube channel is great for full features of products and the personalities of our sales staff," he explained. "Facebook is an old institution, and that user will continue to evolve and change — it's an older demographic right now."

Several suppliers attribute their boom in business to working with CME.

"They've brought us a lot of business, and we're grateful," said one supplier. Another voter stated that their company's growth with CME has been "very steady and healthy," and reports that business is up 10 percent in the year to date.

CME has no future plans to stop the success or fix what isn't broken. "There's no bullshit in us," Yonke said. "Whether it's five years or 10, we'll [always] be here, kicking ass and taking names." **MI**

Chicago Music Exchange Chicago

Principal: Andrew Yonke, CEO

Founded: 1990

Employees: 74

Locations: 1

Annual Revenue: \$39 million