

Crank It to 11!

Sweetwater Sound in Harmony With Customers

By Matt Ottinger

Music and audio equipment dealer Sweetwater Sound, Inc., based in Fort Wayne, continues to strike a chord with its customers.

The company broke ground on an expansion in November 2012 – in a ceremony attended by then-Gov. Mitch Daniels. That new space is now set to be put to good use.

To say Sweetwater has come a long way since president/founder Chuck Surack launched the business out of his Volkswagen bus 35 years ago would be an understatement (*BizVoice*® first profiled the organization in March-April 2008). The company has now served nearly two million customers. It boasts a staff of 660 – and is about to add 132,000 square feet to its existing 180,000 square feet.

“We’ve been growing like crazy,” Surack states. “We moved into our current building in 2006, and we had just over 200 employees. Then there was the recession and everything else, so to be approaching 700 (workers) is unbelievable.”

Banging the talent drum

As the business has become more well known, it’s been easier to entice bright minds from all over the country and bring them to Allen County.

“Attracting talent is easier on a couple levels,” Surack asserts. “We have the credibility today. It used to be that they’d say, ‘Fort Wayne, where’s that?’ But now if they’re in the music industry at all, they probably know.”

Sweetwater is also reaping the rewards of its own efforts, having helped start music technology programs at the University of St. Francis and Indiana University-Purdue University Fort Wayne.

“They’ve been around long enough now that we’re getting first- and second-year graduates from those programs,” he relays, adding that Ball State and Indiana universities also have noteworthy campus music initiatives.

“Because products are more readily accessible, and television has gone to stereo and high definition ... there’s a bigger need than ever for people to understand how to create good, quality content,” Surack offers. “Therefore, lots of recording schools around the country are doing well at developing and graduating students to go work at Sweetwater, Disney, Google, Microsoft or Apple.”



Sweetwater Sound has erected a new warehousing facility on its campus as part of a recent 132,000-square-foot expansion. The space and growth it represents are music to the ears of president/founder Chuck Surack.

Same tempo

When asked how technology has changed recently, Surack explains there have been many developments in the world of audio equipment.

“It’s not one big thing, but lots of things,” he quantifies. “Computers have gotten more powerful and what used to cost hundreds of thousands or millions when I started, today you can get for virtually free on your computer.”

He contends the popularity of in-home studios have allowed musicians to more effectively do their own recordings, although it gives Sweetwater the opportunity to sell microphones, headphones, speakers and other accessories.

Raising the volume

Another change for Sweetwater is that, like most businesses, it now has a presence on social media.

“You can’t be in business today and not have a strong social presence,” Surack believes. “It’s growing for us; we have 160,000 followers on Facebook, which generates over \$1 million every year. And we have over 2,100 different videos on YouTube and 300 million views.”

He adds that YouTube gives Sweetwater a venue to post training videos to help customers use their equipment.

And though its size has expanded, Sweetwater remains focused on its core market of music and audio equipment.

“We’ve continued in this market and drive hard; 82% of our phone calls are outgoing, where we drive the business,” Surack explains. “We don’t wait for our phone to ring.”

When asked how Sweetwater has been able to gain such a loyal customer base, Surack says that the buyer/seller relationship should be about much more than price – a concept that gives his organization an edge on the competition.

“Virtually all of my competitors are only selling on price,” he surmises. “There’s a race to the bottom on price. The problem is customers will also come and go on price. In our case, we need to be competitive on price, but our strength is customer service.

“Customers see we’re not looking to make money off one quick sale, but we want to build that relationship. They feel like they’re buying from a friend. It’s an old-fashioned approach on relationships, coupled with new technology, and it works for us,” he concludes.

RESOURCE: Chuck Surack, Sweetwater Sound, at www.sweetwater.com