

# Ladies' Choice: Million-Dollar Piano Sales Women

*... they don't sell,  
they 'match make'*

**W**omen who excel at selling pianos share a lot: smarts, a passion for the business, a love of the piano, and the belief that being a woman is definitely an advantage in this game. Just listen to their language:

"I find great delight in being kind of 'musical matchmaker'" says Theo Boylan of Piano Distributors in Florida. "I put customers and pianos together for a fulfilling relationship."

They also share one other thing: they aren't really sure why there aren't more of them.

"I have no idea!" replies Nancy Docksey of Denver-based Onofrio Piano when asked why there isn't more of her gender match-making people and pianos in this manner. Others, however, point out that it's hard work, long hours, and a tough gig for young mothers.

Yet there are certainly women customers coming into the showroom.

"I'll say I see about 50/50 men and women," says Beryl Platt of Frank & Camille's in Melville, N.Y. "With married couples for example: one of the two wants to spend the money on a luxury item, and the other will pull them back and not get carried away as quickly as the other. You have to be able to read them."

"Often during the weekday, you'll get a woman coming in to do an initial overview of inventory and get some working knowledge," notes Susan Lutz of Steinway / Baldwin of St. Louis. "But it's much more common to have both husband and wife, and even the kids in tow." Still, the women are overwhelmingly involved in sale and most agree they represent the major factor in committing to the dotted line.

Interestingly, several equally successful piano sales women were contacted for this piece but were too shy to grant an interview (hard to imagine a salesman being too shy to talk about himself) Here are a few who had no reticence about sharing their experiences, views, and advice.

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## Theo Boylan

**Piano Distributors**

**Brandon, Fla.**

**Brands:** Yamaha, Wyman, Nordiska, Pearl River, and Petrof.

**In Her Home:** A Yamaha Grand.



"I've been in the business 10 years, the last five years with Piano Distributors.

When Tom Smith, the GM of Thoroughbred Music's piano department hired me in 1997,

his sales manager, a 30-year veteran, threatened to quit on him that day. 'She's never sold pianos in her life,' he ranted. I'll always be grateful that Tom stood his ground when he replied, 'I think she can do it.'

"After I had been employed for a few months, the sales manager apologized. 'I haven't been wrong very often,' he said, 'but I was definitely wrong about you. You're outselling me!' We became fast friends."

**What it takes.** "You've got to love people or get out of sales. You've got love

your products. You've got to love hard work or you'll go flat broke!

"I'm not especially talented, but I do care about folks. I guess I've been able to convey that to many of my customers. I try to listen more than talk. I want to earn their trust. I don't think you can fake genuine concern — at least not for very long.

*"I try to listen more than talk. I want to earn their trust. I don't think you can fake genuine concern — at least not for very long."*

I bought my own Yamaha in 1983. My confidence in this manufacturer has only grown stronger as I've gone behind the scenes to the point I have turned down lucrative offers to sell for companies that don't carry Yamaha. My trip to Japan in 2000 was one of the highlights of my life. Now the Clavinova and Disklavier have stolen my heart. They change lives. I can't wait until I can own one of each.

"Bill and Sandy Boyce, owners of Piano Distributors, lead by example in that department. They are tireless. One thing I especially appreciate is that even during slow periods, they don't ride herd on salespeople. They motivate, entice, cajole, and cattle prod, maybe, but they don't launch into verbal attacks."

Challenges. "In the sales aspect of the piano industry, I haven't seen any barriers. Male customers don't usually mind a female salesperson at all if she knows her stuff. Women don't really have an advantage, either. I've seen salesmen who can warm up customers in 60 seconds and saleswomen who couldn't thaw them out in 60 minutes. Success there doesn't seem to be gender-specific in my experience."

Advice. "A career in piano sales is not for the faint of heart. Develop passion and perseverance. We have a specialized product with a relatively small market, so understand that the fear of failure inside never goes away. As a wise person once said about life, 'So ... do it afraid.' You've got to be ready to live on the edge and be up for any kind of challenge.

"Study the fundamentals of selling every time you can in every place you can, but then tailor those to your personality and character. It's like having a custom-made suit. You might accessorize with accents from here or there, but the main suit should fit you like a glove. If you're comfortable with yourself, chances are the customers will be, too. And that means they buy!"

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## Karen Cuneo

**Ramirez**

**Music Exchange**

**Newcastle, Calif.**

**Brands:** Yamaha, Wyman.

**In Her Home:** Mason & Hamlin Model BB



"I started out at Sherman Clay in 1975 as a Pipette working in the mall. I dressed in a little green suit and sold those first little organs, and we sold a ton. I was also teaching group lessons.

But the way I got into selling pianos is that at one point all the sales people went to a conference one day and I was told to just take customer's names. But instead I sold two pianos and got the bug! I'm probably the oldest living piano sales woman ...

"Since those early days I've sold just about every piano. I met my husband selling Steinways. Then we went to Yamaha. The coolest part about my career has been teaching, though, because if I just sat in a store waiting for customers I would not have been successful at all."

*"I never lie, and I never worked for anybody who has a product I don't like to sell."*

**Advantages.** "I think a woman in this business has a better chance to succeed. The customer doesn't get that 'car salesman vibe' [from a woman] and men in this business sometimes come across that way. It's a situation of, 'I like buying

from you, and you look honest.” I never lie, and I never worked for anybody who has a product I don’t like to sell. If you don’t like what you’re selling it’s obvious to the customer.”

**Challenges.** “I don’t think a lot of my bosses took my advice or listened to what I had to say as much as they did the salesmen, but I didn’t really care. For me it wasn’t about ego. I just loved my job so I didn’t care whether they thought I was smart or not. But I was always the best, and I always win the contest.

“I did once take a manager job and it was hard being a manager for a store full of men. I’m not sure why. Men in general just don’t like having a woman boss.”

**Why not more?** “In our company most of our women don’t stay. Maybe it’s the hours — it is a seven-day-a-week job. The whole time my son was growing up, I worked every Sunday. When you have a family, it’s really hard for a woman, and when you start, you’re not making a lot of money the first few years.”

**Advice.** “Today’s piano salespeople are the laziest. They feel entitled. They

want to sit and wait for the customer to come to them. They don’t want to make calls. Older people will talk of the days when a boss would put you in a van full of pianos and tell you to not come back until you’ve sold them all! [Laughs] So you have to be willing to work long hours, and do more than you’re asked to by your boss. That’s why you don’t see many women doing it. Though if young women aren’t willing to do it, and just take a nine-to-five job and take their little hourly wage, they’ll never make a good living.

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## Nancy Docksey

**Onofrio Piano**

**Denver, Colo.**

**Brands:** Bösendorfer, Estonia, Kawai, Pearl River, Wyman.

**In Her Home:** Petrof 6’4” Grand

“I’ve been selling pianos since 1994 at Onofrio Piano Company. Prior to that I never sold anything before. I have a bachelor of music education from Michigan State University, and have taught in the public schools.”



### What it takes.

“It is important to be involved musically in the community. I belong to most of the music teachers associations in the area. Being a member of these organizations

gives me an insight into what the piano teachers needs are and how our company can help. My husband is the director of the Lamont School of Music at the University of Denver and I am involved in many activities at that level. For many years I was a member of the Rotary and played piano for them at our meetings. (Many of them have pianos that I sold to them!)

“It is easy to sell pianos when you are a part of a great company. The Onofrio Piano Company has been family-owned for 107 years and has established a stellar reputation. We sell used and new in all price categories so that I can answer any need that my customer might have. The leadership in the Onofrio Company is exceptional.”

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**Approach.** “I listen carefully to the customer, and ask questions to clarify their thoughts so I can direct them to the proper pianos. Most customers don’t know a thing about pianos, so I often give my customers a tour of the facility explaining all the parts and pieces of the piano and why it is so important to have a company like ours supporting them.

*“... if we think a customer will relate better to a female, then I take care of them; if it’s a ‘guy guy,’ I’ll hand him off to one of the men.”*

“Being a teacher, I explain carefully the options available and build the value and validity in learning to play the piano. We always do a regulation, tuning, inspection, cabinetry touch-up, and anything else a piano might need before the piano is delivered. Then we come out to the customer’s home once the piano has acclimatized to its new environment and do it again. Our technicians and tuners and refinishers are all highly trained and good with people. It is so easy to sell under these circumstances.”

**Advantages.** “I think it is a great advantage being a woman. A lot of people prefer to deal with women. In our store, we have a great synergy, and if we think a customer will relate better to a female, then I take care of them; if it’s a ‘guy guy,’ I’ll hand him off to one of the men.”

**Why aren’t their more?** “I have no idea. I love people, I love pianos, I was looking for something different and it fell into place for me. I will say it would be difficult to do with a family. I never have two days off in a row and that can get old. It would be difficult for a young mother, for example.”

**Advice.** “You have to be self-motivated. You find a lot of your own leads and support customers and follow up with them. It’s a lot of self-directed stuff. If you have a high energy level and are motivated, you can make a really great living at it. You have to have a real serious work ethic.”

## Susan Lutz

**Steinway Piano Gallery / Baldwin Piano Center  
St. Louis, Mo.**

**Brands:** Steinway, Baldwin.

**In Her Home:** A Mahogany Steinway L Grand

“I’ve been here for 23 years, and I am currently director of institutional sales, which covers a hundred-mile radius of St. Louis.

“I was a piano performance major and set on performing and decided to get



married — and that sort of took me out of the performance loop. Many years ago this organization had several locations, and I met [current vice president] Gerry Mal-

zone when I became head piano teacher at their Springfield, Illinois, store. Then I thought, ‘Who better to sell a piano than a piano teacher?’ And I decided I would



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advantage to be  
a woman in  
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it's documented  
that women are  
more perceptive.  
I use that instinct  
all the time."*

**Approach.** "As a woman, I can speak the language of women, and the woman buys the piano. I think if you can talk to the woman and they don't feel threatened, you automatically have a good rapport. Sales can be intimidating when handled by a man. As for me ... if anything, I'm too laid-back!"

"When selling to a man, I've never felt he wasn't listening to my description of the inside of piano. But I don't sell pianos by the way they are built. I sell a piano because I can play it. I find a lot of salespeople don't play, and while everyone has their area of experience, I can sell a piano by the way it sounds even when the person I'm selling to doesn't play. I can let them hear the differences between the

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instruments. I take their hand to the keyboard, and let them feel the difference of the keys.

"When someone wants the nuts and bolts, I will go there and discuss it with them. But that's not where I start."

**Advantages.** "I think it's a huge advantage to be a woman in this business and the reason I say that is because it's documented that women are more perceptive. I use that instinct all the time. Although it's a little different now that I'm in institutional sales because I'm working with heads of music department and they know what they want and know their budget."

## Beryl Platt

Frank & Camille's  
Melville, N.Y.

**Brands:** Yamaha, Baldwin, Petrof, Roland, Hamilton, Pearl River, Howard.

"I've been selling pianos for 20 years. I was with Frank & Camille's for 10 years, then I sold pianos in Florida, then I was an interior designer, and then I returned here four years ago."

**Approach.** "It takes understanding that the customers are often looking at an item they are not familiar with. A lot of players come in and they want a baby grand, but others want a piano with a player system and you have to gear your sales approach to them."

**Challenges.** There are no barriers, none whatsoever. Women do very well in this field ... there are some customers that want to be very technical and it's always better to have a man for that, but those customers are very few. We can describe it as well as anyone else, but we can always call over a male peer to do it if necessary for the sale.

"Most are interested in the look of the furniture, and they asked advice about design, and those kinds of issues are geared more toward a female's perspective."

**Approach.** "For everyone, you have to be able to zero in on what it is that would make him or her feel excited about this purchase. Other than that, there are little differences. Everyone develops his or her own style of selling and everyone says something another one might say."

"There are people who do top-down selling, bring them to the most expensive, then the least expensive and send them up. I like to start at the bottom. I don't

like them to feel badly — like if Grandma wants to buy a piano and only has \$3,000. You don't want them to feel bad by taking them to a \$10,000 piano. You take people like that to that expensive piano first and you may lose them as a customer."

**Advantages.** "A woman can have an advantage because a woman is a little less threatening, a little more disarming. Many women are more comfortable with women, and men regard women as less likely to pressure them for the sale."

**Why not more?** "I don't know. I've worked for different piano stores, and in the past I owned one, and I know other women who are in piano sales. It is a predominantly a male industry, but more and more women are getting involved."

**Advice.** "It's a nice way to make a living and more interesting than furniture sales, for example, but to do well you have to enjoy people, you have to be a people person. If you're not, it's a job that will never be right for you. We're not just order-takers. It takes a certain personality."

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