Mya-Moe Ukuleles

A case study

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Oh my my Mya-Moe

Preface

It is a rare treat in a business case study to combine passion with logistics. This case study of Mya-Moe Ukuleles is written from the perspective of an author who loves music and loves the ukulele. In my previous life before Finland, I had a BA in vocal performance with a minor in theater. I started playing clarinet at the age of 10. My parents bought it to bribe me into successfully completing a science fair project. From there I branched out to much of the woodwind family; alto sax, bass and alto clarinet, baroque recorder, even managing to slip in a brass instrument, the mellophone. I didn't discover opera until my last year of high school, but voice became my major instrument with my 2nd instrument being the clarinet.

I say that to say this: of all the instruments I've picked up in my lifetime, none has given me the pleasure that playing the ukulele has. I can enjoy everything I play up to a certain point, but ukulele is the only instrument that also provides stress relief as well. In the great tradition of parlor instruments, it is easy to play but tough to play well.

Despite the ukulele boom, the community still has a feeling of being a small one. To choose Mya-Moe out of all of the ukulele brands and builders is not to suggest that other builders are not just as passionate as I am about the ukulele. I chose them because what sets them apart is that they strive for the total package: They want to make playable instruments that sound exactly like they should, delivering them in a reasonable amount of time, built from wood that is largely sustainable, and at prices that are absolutely reasonable for the features included in the instrument, custom made for the hands of the player playing it. These goals are nearly impossible for even a large and experienced fretted instrument manufacturer, much less a factory staffed by two.

Do they succeed? A quick search of Youtube suggests that the proof is in the pudding, that their ukuleles sound the business. Certainly their reputation in the community is flawless. Their reputation for customer service and high quality precedes them. Let's take a closer look at how a small production firm can set lofty goals and plan the operations of how to achieve them.

About Mya-Moe

Mya-Moe instruments began life as Broken M Acoustics, run by Gordon Mayer, a guitar luthier with 7 years of experience at the trade. Then in early 2008 guitar player Moe Dixon requested a resonator ukulele. Three months later, the result was that demand was so great for the resonator ukuleles, that guitar production ceased. At that point, Gordon recruited his wife, Char into the business. Char is a professional musician, and both Gordon and Char hold masters degrees in engineering.

A change in direction and the addition of Char to the team meant a change in name, so thinking of Moe as their inspiration, they played around with Gordon's last name until something cool and Hawaiian-sounding resulted: Mya-Moe, pronounced Maija-Mo-eh (Written in as best the author can do in phonetic Finnish.). (myamoeukuleles.com)

As for why they build ukuleles, Gordon says it best in this quote taken from his builder's blog:

> ...we make them because we like to see where various musicians will take them, and we love to see our ukuleles on stage. It is as if we write 1/2 of a novel, then hand it off to someone else and they finish it in a way that we never could have imagined. (Blog October 2010)

A Day in the Life

Like so many entrepreneurs, Mya-Moe are passionate and excited about what they do. That excitement keeps quality high and customers coming back. Business is booming, but it means long hours and 7 day work weeks. After the work day is done, it's time for customer service: answering emails and posting pictures of work progress. When a customer waits months and has put down a deposit, they have come to expect progress reports. (Blog April 2010)

If a luthier's work starts to get noticed, popularity might be a double-edged sword. Planning is a real challenge, specially if there is no inventory tracking or any scheduling systems in place. Imagine having a hit product worldwide, built 10 at-a-time by you in your backyard shed, each one tweaked to each individual customer's specifications, with the expectation of the highest quality.

Email and phone service is something that can never be eliminated, but when it comes to progress reports, a company can take more advantage of social networking. Mya-Moe posts brief 140 character reports with pictures on their Twitter account. The pictures are public, so it is good promotion, but it also saves time. Of course the time saved then goes to helping customers plan new ukes and to help with old ones, but if they were writing the same lengthy emails with pictures for each customer, it would take that much longer. (Twitter @myamoeukuleles)

Mya-Moe builds about 140 ukuleles per year, with each one taking 20 days to build. Typically they have no inventory of completed ukuleles to speak of, although some stock is kept on hand for customers who wish to purchase at ukulele festivals around the world. (myamoeukuleles.com, Blog April 2010)

Goals

The Mya-Moe website states the main goal of the company clearly: “Our goal is to build the best ukuleles at any price.” Further reading the builder's blog reveals a passion for building the perfect instrument, even while recognizing it as an unobtainable goal. An implied goal of the company, given the clearly stated waiting list times and their departure from the batch-build format, is to deliver an instrument in a reasonable amount of time while not running into backlogs lasting 3 years or more, a problem in the ukulele building community. How does a factory of two achieve those goals? (myamoeukuleles.com, Blog January 2009)

If Mya-Moe was a larger factory, then there would be a set specification for all of the instruments, and they would be nearly all made from the same tone woods However, there are differences in every piece of wood, even wood coming from the same family. What will make one instrument sing may make another simply be pretty good, or worse.

The batch process

The common philosophy is that smaller production facilities staffed by one or two people are probably better suited to the batch process. Traditionally, ukuleles are built in batches. The builder starts a group of ukuleles, typically to use the same wood on all of them. The builder is able to effectively use the chosen wood and materials, repeating the same process over and over on each one. After all, if producing one of an item, it can make sense to make much more than one at the same time, and have some inventory to sell.

However, this means that the process stalls when the wood is ready for finish, which of course takes some days. All the instruments are paused at the same stage. The major flaw in this plan is that if problems develop in the build, the luthier may not see it until each and every instrument in the batch has the same problem. The luthier will correct the problem in the next batch, but in the meantime some customers are going to get flawed instruments at a premium price, or the luthier will have some work to redo.

An assembly-line for two

Many companies dealing in customization have quality and perfection as goals. Some of those have similar time goals. Accepting the axiom of “Speed, quality, price: pick two” as true, how does one design production so that these goals can be attained with a workforce of two?

The problems of time, and consistency are solved by dropping the batch process for an assembly line. Each day, one ukulele goes into production, and one ukulele gets ready for new strings and to be shipped out.

This does not mean the same ukulele starts and finishes on the same day. As stated above, one build takes about 20 days. What it means is that Char starts building a body, and sends a completed body to Gordon, who fits the necks onto the bodies. Char works from the body down, and Gordon works from the neck up, along with wood finishing, and final setup. (myamoeukuleles.com, Blog April 2010)

Because one instrument starts the process and one instrument ends, it is easier to predict build times for the customers. It also improves consistency. The ukuleles are not treated as a group, but as an individual instrument. It is easier to anticipate problems and fix them before they become real issues. (Blog September 2010)

Conclusion

The case study of Mya-Moe shows that it is possible to use a process that is by design intended for large scale production, and tailor it for use in customization. It solves the issues of unpredictability, inconsistency, and inefficiency often found in the batch process. Mya-Moe have taken these operational ideas originally intended to save time and money, and tailored them as a means of quality control. From their perspective, it must seem simply to be good common sense. However, what they have achieved is innovation in their industry.

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