

Interview with Jeff Radke, Executive Vice President of Sales and Chief Sales Officer
May 22, 2019
Via Skype

Robert Willey: What do you do in the process of hiring and training employees?

Jeff Radke: I view finding the right people and getting them in door as my most important job starting from Day 1 when I began with 22 Sales Engineers in 1996. I'm integrally involved with the interview process. I don't do the up-front interviews, after Jeff McDonald and the rest of the team have done the initial phone interview to qualify applicants and there has been some initial testing. I have interviewed every person that has gone on to the next stage and been considered for a Sales Engineer position here at Sweetwater. I've done some interviews for other positions, too, but my primary responsibility is sales.

RW: What part do you play in designing the tests and training?

JR: I have some input on that. The questions that we ask before and during the interview are pretty much mine, and over the years there are certain responses that I'm looking for to those questions. As far as the personality profiles, we look at a bunch of them and we all take them to see if we think they're valid, how they feel to us, if they're giving us the information we want and giving us good foundational knowledge. Unfortunately, tests are not perfect, and accuracy varies from 1 which is the lowest to 10 which is the highest, so if it's a 1 then we have to go through a lot more qualifying to go through the process. The tech exam is much more black and white—either they know if or they don't. Nobody does extraordinarily well. Over my entire tenure we're only had a couple of people who got over 80%. It's a good way for us to get an idea of what areas they are strong in. Some areas are more product-oriented, others are applications oriented. If nothing else, it helps people who come in thinking they know everything to get a better understanding of what they don't know.

RW: I have an open online class (<http://willshare.com/courses/mmp280>) to help anyone who is interested in the job to help prepare for the process. Our textbook is the Sweetwater ProGear catalog, we go through a section a week and I've suggested they study the glossary on your website and make flash cards. One of the assignments is to write a catalog entry for an unlisted product, another is to make a demonstration video describing its unique features. Are there any tips you can give people to help them prepare for the exam?

JR: One of the best things we recommend is to look through the [inSync articles](#) on the website. There's a lot of great information there application-wise. If a candidate studies those and loves gear (reads reviews) it will go a long way toward helping them with the exam. It's also worth noting that they need a broad knowledge, and also a relatively deep understanding of every product category. "Specialists" need not apply. One thing that makes a lot of people stumble are the acronyms. For example, they've may have used the word "MIDI" for a long time without knowing what the letters stand for.

RW: I always wished someone would make an index for the articles, videos, and Sweetwater Minutes. There's so much information, I should go back and build some links for my online class to group some material. I guess the best way to find specific information is to type in words into the search bar to find related articles. Jeff McDonald was showing me the growing number of great videos that the marketing team is making, which fits the way people consume information today. I guess the best thing to do is just to keep going back to the website regularly to find out what's new and try to keep up with it that way, because if you don't it piles up and you get left behind.

JR: That really is our reality. Either you love it or you don't, it's not something you can dabble at. If you're passionate about it you're going to be actively seeking out that knowledge one way or the other, in forums and the tremendous amount of information that our marketing department is doing. Inside the company we continue the training on a regular basis.

RW: Are you involved with the ongoing supervision and cultivating the Sales Engineers once they're there? Jeff McDonald told that even senior Sales Engineers have someone to talk to.

JR: It's something that I truly enjoy, but as we've grown it's become more difficult and I've had to do that through Sales Managers and other folks. I'm still very actively involved in Sweetwater University, for example we started onboarding a new group of 15 Sales Engineers on Monday. Over the course of the week we do multiple things to help them understand our culture and to get a feel for who we are beyond what they already may know. I love that Chuck meets them and tells his story. I meet with everyone and help them start to mentally prepare the mindset, understand how the approach should work, the WHY of what we do in Sweetwater U. and why they should pay attention in order to get them off on the right foot. Sweetwater U. is constantly evolving. We did another major revision for this year. We tried to steer it a little away from brands and products and back to understanding the technology more broadly. For example, if I understand how an optical compressor from manufacturer works, then I will be able to apply that to the ones made by manufacturers B, C, and D. Roughly half of the classes are about the technology side, and we cover every aspect of it so that every Sales Engineer is well-versed in all our products since we are so relationship-oriented. The areas of study include analog, digital, keyboards, MIDI, synthesis, drums, guitars, lighting, and the DJ market. Recording and PA is still our heart, if you will, so we also cover the live sound, recording, and pro audio side of things. That's the technical part, and we have manufacturers come in and teach that. We've brought a little more of that in-house because there are so many tremendous resources here where we have folks that can teach that sort of thing.

The other half, or maybe a little more than half, which I think is maybe even more important than the technology side but a little harder to teach, is customer service. This is as much life skills as sales training. Obviously, you have to understand our extraordinarily sophisticated systems, which started with Chuck messing with File Maker way back when we built the first version of our own database. Now we do all that stuff in-house which gives us a tremendous competitive advantage. It's a pretty deep thing, so we have to train people how to use it.

We start role-playing from the first day to get them acclimated to how we sell. The way we sell is very different from the norm, which is when the customer asks “What’s your price?” and you get them a price. If we do it that way we’d actually be doing them a disservice, because we wouldn’t be figuring out what they really needed. For example, they may have read in a forum or heard from a buddy about some great microphone, or seen one in a studio. When they ask us how much it would cost our response is going to be, “That’s a great mic. What are you going to be using it for?” We’re going to find out what gear they own, if they’re in a band, if they’re going to use it live, what they’re going to attempt to do with it, what their budget is, all the critical things for them, and in the process of that we’re also going to let them know who we are. If they want to buy a guitar we’re going to talk about the 55-point guitar evaluation, and the fact that we have a temperature and humidity-controlled warehouse, luthiers on staff, a whole guitar workshop, and about the relationships and training we have from vendors. Helping the Sales Engineers learn how to communicate with the customers is a huge part of that part of Sweetwater U.

The life skills part could include me going over *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, which I think is great not only here but for outside of work. I do a class on goal setting. Most humans never set any sort of written goals at all. I talk about why it’s important and help them understand the process, and hopefully get them in the position where they’ll be doing that for themselves and for their families. One of the things that we do that is really unusual, I don’t know of anyone else that does this in our industry, is that the goal setting helps Sales Engineers set their own goals, and then our Chief Financial Officer and I build the company goals off of that. They will say how much money they are going to make, how many calls they need to make because of that, how it’s going to be weighted from month to month in order to work around their vacation plans, the attachment rate, return rate, talk time—all the meaningful metrics. We’re not just preparing them to go out on the sales floor, we’re preparing them to run their own business.

RW: That sounds like “The Perfect Conversation” that I’ve heard mention of and have always wanted to better understand. About how long does that conversation last? It probably takes longer the first time you call compared with the fifth call.

CS: Very much so. There are a million variations on The Perfect Conversation. It’s important that you remember to continue to help them. Maybe my customer plays guitar but her son is a keyboardist. Maybe he was an infant when the Sales Engineer started dealing with her, and now he’s starting to take lessons. Unless I continue to maintain that relationship I’m never going to know that her kid is playing keyboards now. I have to keep asking those questions. I also really have to keep differentiating, from a business perspective, how Sweetwater is different. One of our senior guys, [Kenny Bergle](#), has been here about 26 years. He can be talking to someone he’s been dealing with for 15 years and I will occasionally hear him say something like “That’s a great thing about Sweetwater” and then he’ll talk about tech support. If you’ve got a problem with your system we’ll take care of it. We’re not going to be like the manufacturer who will only take care of the thing that is theirs, we’ll help you solve the problem with your system. If there’s a clocking issue and you have an Apogee converter and

Avid's Pro Tools and they're not communicating well we're going to help fix that, we're not going to say "Well, it sounds like the other guy's problem." We're just going to take care of it. The Perfect Conversation always includes qualifying, differentiating, and selling ourselves. [Mac Hatton](#) can talk about working at a big studio in Nashville, now all of a sudden we are differentiating ourselves and we're not just a kid in a black t-shirt and ripped up jeans that you typically find employed in a music store, they're a serious professional who is studying on an ongoing basis. It's the reason that we have a Sales Resource Center. It started in my office in the old building where I had equipment that Sales Engineers could check out for a while. Now it's much more organized, there's over a half a million dollar's worth of stuff in there, like big PA speakers, a little system for a coffee shop gig thing, tons and tons of pedals, guitars, you name it. We have an SSL console that you can check out. It took 4 guys and three vehicles to figure out which one it would fit in. They got it into this guy's house, and now he has other Sales Engineers coming over and they've got it plugged in and are listening to it and getting in deep and really understanding it and figuring out which customers it would be good for, how it sounds with their monitors. The same thing goes with microphones. You can take home 5 really nice condenser microphones and then when you're talking with a customer the next day you can say "I was using a 251 and a U47 and a C12 and here's what I liked about each one in different situations. I'm using Genelec monitors." The customer realizes that you are actually using that stuff in your studio instead of dealing with some dude hanging out in a music store.

RW: The only risk I can see is that it's going to cut into the number of DVDs that employees check out from your video lending library. It's crazy, someone saying "I think I'll take that SSL home..."

JR: (laughs) Here's the funny thing. We use the same system for both. We scan cards and if they have an overdue video they can't check out gear.

RW: So there is a connection there. "I'm sorry, you can't check out 'Home Alone' until you bring back the SSL."

JR: Exactly. We give them a little longer with the SSL since it takes longer to move that and learn about it. One of our vendors supplied all the patch cables and everything else. It's very cool what the Sales Engineers have access to.

RW: How do you maintain the culture when you're growing so fast? In his book, *Start With WHY* Simon Sinek says that the risk of success is that the vision will get diluted when employees that come along later don't have as much contact with the founder. Chuck won't have as much influence on the 500th employee as he has on you, since you've known him from the early days going back to when he was working out of his house. How do you keep the spirit of teamwork going?

JR: I have always been very conscious of that. I never wanted to lose the small-company vibe. When I was working for a manufacturer I called on Chuck back and to give them a training session and there were just 4 guys. I really liked what I saw there. Later when I got here as an

employee I really like the level of teamwork that I saw. It is a commission-based environment, but unlike many other places that are structured that way, we don't have sharks, there aren't people who are in it for themselves. Fundamentally that starts with me hiring right. I hire 100% for the culture. That means that I sometimes say no to guys who are extraordinary sales people and extremely knowledgeable because they wouldn't fit the culture. The cool thing now is that if they don't fit the culture the Sales Engineer team squeezes them out almost before I'd find out about it. Hiring right is why I'm so invested in the process, along with Jeff McDonald, our Senior VP of Human Resources. It's why we test so thoroughly and have all these crazy personality tests. It's why we bring them here physically so we can see them face-to-face. Body language is a big reality for me. Anyone can fake it on the phone and spout what they think we want to hear. Once they get a little way into the testing we can discern a little more about them, and then once I get them face-to-face and they see the campus and facility they get a better feel for what we're about. The interview process is a two-way street. We make sure that we find people who want to come here and are comfortable being here. We do a number of things with them. There's an initial phone interview, they come in for a tour with one a member of the Sales Management team, so there are multiple people who get eyes and ears on them and get to know them, and I get reports if they have any concerns. Then when I have lunch, I can dig into those issues then and when we have the formal interview which lasts for a couple of hours. We have a really well-defined process since we hire so many people. The on-boarding process is very rigid in terms of content.

We make sure that from Day 1 they are getting big doses of the culture, that permeates everything that we do. In Sweetwater U. even if you're in a technical class and you're role playing you're going to be doing it in a Sweetwater way. Sweetwater U. is a big part of it. Many of the classes are taught by employees.

I'm really proud of Neighborhoods. When I first got here I knew everyone and what they were doing outside of work, knew their families reasonably well, but we got to the point where I couldn't do that, which I find very frustrating but it's just the reality once you start to grow. Somebody could be doing really well here at Sweetwater from a work perspective, but their life could be falling apart outside, which would eventually cause them to leave. I wanted to build a safety network and make sure that anyone that was coming in could maintain that family vibe. I started dividing the sales team into "neighborhoods". Every neighborhood starts out with about 10 people and may grow to 14 or 15 before I have to divide them up again. Within each neighborhood there are a couple of leaders. We are very big on autonomy here. I want to hire really smart people that have the right character, give them the tools, and then turn them loose. If I have to micromanage somebody I made a mistake, or they are having serious issues that we have to work through. The whole sales team nominates leaders, then the leaders are elected. They are typically going to be people who are well-respected and doing things the right way, they're being good teammates, 99% of the time they are already being good mentors to the new folks. I divide the leaders into neighborhoods so that there are two in each group, so that one person can be leaned on if the other isn't in, and they can work together a little bit to help the neighborhood. It's not a layer of management, it's a layer of leadership. They are the people who would probably have seen someone struggling and offered to help, saying

something like “I heard that last conversation and it didn’t seem to go right, how about we try this?”

Within each neighborhood there’s a range of tenure. There’s room for brand new people and some very senior people. There’s a spread of technical abilities as well, for example, having a crazy strong guitar guy or gal in every neighborhood, so if you get a question and don’t know how that vintage neck compares with another, you can turn to that person and ask the question. There will be a big boy or gal PA person in each neighborhood. We take the loud people and spread them out so we don’t have 8 of them shouting each other down in one neighborhood. We take it down to another level and start to look at the personalities within the neighborhood when deciding who to seat next to who. I might want to put someone who’s been a little shy on the phone next to someone who has no problem dialing the phone and making those calls who can kind of mentor them. I have people who request to sit next to a particular person in order to learn from their style, or because “I work a lot with them, and we challenge each other constantly—can we stay together?” I move neighborhoods every year, so they move geographically on the sales floor. I keep the core mostly together, but inevitably as we grow, I have to start more neighborhoods, which gives me an opportunity to create more leaders.

I view those leaders as the Senate of the sales floor. They get some additional neighborhood leader lunches where we’ll have someone from the Marketing Department come in and give them some behind-the-scenes perspective as to what’s going on. We will lean on them a little bit at the beginning of the month when we have a post mortem of the previous month. We’ll put a subset of the leaders, along with key stakeholders from Marketing and Merchandising in a room to talk about what went well, and what didn’t—which bundle or promotion was not effective, or what would be cool to do, so they’re having direct feedback into the company’s future in terms of how we market and the products that we have. We also have subsets of leaders do focus groups with the vendors. A lot of them come to us because we touch so many customers and ask what they are missing, what product should they be developing. These folks get some direct insight from the Sales Engineers to help them build products that will be great for our customers. We have 24,000-25,000 inbound and outbound calls per day. That is more points of contact than any manufacturer has over a long period of time, and we do that in one day. So, if they can talk with someone who is in touch with 80 customers a day they are going to get some really good feedback.

One thing that keeps the small-company vibe alive and healthy is that the people in the neighborhoods take care of each other. If a call comes in for me and I’m out that day, that call will be offered first to my neighborhood before it goes to the whole sales floor, so they get really used to taking care of each other’s customers all day long every day. Very often the Sales Engineers won’t even take a split off of a sale to another Sales Engineer’s customer, which they should frankly after maybe spending an hour with someone on the phone. They just say “It’s a karmic deposit, I know you’ll take care of me next time, let’s just roll.” I’ve never experienced an environment like that anyplace else. In my previous lives I was a Director of Sales for AKG and was a regional sales manager. I’ve seen tons and tons of retailers, it just doesn’t work like

that elsewhere. The other reason that it really works here is that we hire very carefully, train really well to prepare them so I don't turn anybody loose after saying "Here's how you write an invoice, here's how you write a quote, go sell something!" which is how I got thrown into it when I started. Our Sales Engineers are very well-prepared when they go in, and now they've got the system around them where their neighborhood's going to take care of them. If I'm gone today I know that all my messages will be checked, all my emails will be checked and forwarded to my neighborhood.

RW: When did you start this, and has it changed a lot over time?

JR: We're tweaking it all the time. I started the neighborhood concept about 18 years ago. It wasn't everything it is today. In the beginning the neighborhood leaders didn't know what to do or how it worked, so we helped define all that. It took years to really click and mesh and have them understand how it works. Taking care of each other's customers was part of it very early on and was one of the main reasons we started doing this. Back in the old days we'd have someone run around and check messages and forward it to just whoever. We needed to check the messages, but the neighborhood wasn't very defined, it was 25 or 26 people, and it could be anyone who just happened to be there that day.

RW: Are you going to make any changes with the new expansion? You're getting so big. Are you going to have suburbs? Are you going to need satellite cities, or are you just going to replicate this model that's proven to be working?

JR: (laughs) The model works really well. We've discovered over time that it has to be of a certain size. When we set goals, the neighborhoods meet, and each individual will go up in front of the group and say "Here's what I'm going to do next year. Here's how much money I'm going to make, here's how I'm going to get there." The other thing that I think is huge for us is that we're very transparent with numbers. I look at it like being a pro athlete. All my stats are there, anyone can look at them anytime. As this person is saying "I'm going to make \$50,000 next year by making 80 calls a day" someone in the neighborhood can say "Wait, you're making 50 calls a day right now. How are you going to do that, and if it's a good idea, why aren't you doing that now?" The real key for this that I've found to be so powerful is in those meetings is the peer help, when they're presenting their goals and how they're going to get where they're going and what struggles they've had. From Day 1 I'm like dad. I can say "I know what you're capable of doing. Do it." Someone in the neighborhood might say "You know what, when I was at your stage, I made the same mistake you're about to make. What you really need to focus on is this." That's way more powerful.

After they've set their goals we meet throughout the year and the leaders and neighborhood come up with their own topics that they're going to focus on, and then we have content that we talk about. After that everyone's numbers go up on the big screen showing where each person is year to date. They talk about it and figure out what's going on. There's a lot of accountability that goes with that. One person may be struggling making calls and another person may offer to partner up and hold each other accountable, where the person who makes

the fewest calls in the morning buys the other one lunch or a coffee or whatever. There's a lot of good camaraderie there that helps the neighbors take care of each other. Each neighborhood also has an Administrative Assistant that checks voice mail and email.

I created the position of Sales Operations Supervisor last year. The genesis of that begins with the Sales Management team. We are very flat and thin. We don't have a ratio like you might expect in a call center. I hate it when someone refers to us as a call center, because that's not what we're about, we're not here sitting here waiting for the phones to ring. We're very relationship oriented, very long-term oriented, very pro in what we do. The ratio in a call center would be 1 to 12 or maybe even 1 to 8. For us it's not unusual for one Sales Manager to have 40 or 50 Sales Engineer, which is pretty crazy. One of the things I've really pressed on is that every Sales Engineer needs to have a coach, so every Sales Manager has a coaching roster. There is one that helps with folks who are fresh out of Sweetwater University, because at that point they're learning how to build their business and get things rolling, and then they get handed off to other Sales Managers. There are people who specialize in certain things, one might be database management. I tend to send them to Brad, because he's the guy who can help you sort this out. Sales Operations Supervisors came into place so that we could have more bandwidth for coaching as opposed to helping people with how to use the systems. There are multiple things that they have to do that are really critical. They are looking at our invoice queue and getting manager approval if there's a discount, if there's something happening with commissions, so they're really on top of the internal structure and helping people understand the why and wherefore of that. They're also very involved with the new folks who've been here for one or two years, helping them make sure they're using the systems properly and getting the most out of them, because they're pretty complex. They're also the first line of defense for any tech issues, questions, or anything else.

Since we develop everything in-house there is no end to great ideas. Sometimes those great ideas are user error when someone doesn't understand how to do things the simplest way. Bradley Every is our IT liaison, a position that we created in the last couple of years, because as we've grown bigger it's been important to prioritize IT development. They also feed back information into Sweetwater U., letting the trainers know which the functions or processes that are often causing the most problems for recent graduates. They are not just dealing with the brand new folks, they can also help the guy who's been here for 20 years, like Jeffrey Green. He's been updated a million times since he's been here, but maybe he just missed one of those things and is doing something the old-fashioned hard way, they can help figure that out. They're keeping an eye on all that stuff and are really operations-oriented so that Sales Managers have more time for coaching and mentoring.

We're constantly feeding back what we're hearing and take turns auditing Sweetwater classes to make sure we're getting everything out of them that we need to. We hope to engender an environment in which anyone is comfortable making a suggestion. If I'm a Sales Engineer and I don't understand why we're doing something a certain way, that it doesn't feel right for the customer, or the company, or for me, or it seems really clunky, that person should talk with someone who can give them an answer. Maybe that person is an Account Coordinator in their

neighborhood that is doing a lot of the back office things, and if they can't give them the answer then maybe they talk with their neighborhood leader. If the answer still doesn't seem right, they should talk with a Sales Manager. If they don't get the right answer they want they elevate it to a VP or Senior VP of Sales, or to me and say "I've been talking to these guys and I still don't understand why we're doing it this way, it just doesn't seem right." If I don't give them an answer that makes sense they should talk to Chuck, and we strongly encourage that, not as a way to go over peoples' heads, but as a way of getting an answer. I tell them "If you ever get to Chuck I will be stunned, because we'll either give you answer where you can see why we do it that way" or many times we'll say "Yeah, you're right. That worked great 3 years ago or 3 months ago, we should be changing that because it's not as customer-centric as we want to be." That's foundationally the way that we get that stuff to come up. In the worst case somebody will complain to a neighborhood leader or have an idea and then they'll pop into a Sales Manager's office and say "Hey, what do you think about this?"

Personal Perspective Worksheets are something that I've done as long as we've been doing goal-setting. They start with a preamble that explains why I want the information, and talk about ongoing improvement in what they're doing and how to change, and how to have quality of life at work. It gets fairly deep philosophically. Each year I have several new questions, some are specifically for brand new employees. This year we asked "What do you believe will be your greatest challenge or road blocks in the coming months?", "What hindered your job performance?", "What change or improvement in Sweetwater had the most positive impact for you this year?", "How can we better support you?", "What does a great day at work look like for you?", and "What have you done to keep yourself engaged this year?" I change the questions every year and I am continually blown away by the effort they make to respond sincerely. They don't look at this as a chore. They feed us back information, and the Sales Managers and I give them personal feedback on every single one. I take the whole collection and forward it to Chuck. I remember the very first time I did it. He called a meeting the next day and called in the appropriate managers and sat us all down because he'd sat up and read every dang one of these, which I love. He said, "Hey, is this really going on in this department? We've got to fix that." It was a tremendous way for us to get feedback, and it's pretty easy to see trends in certain departments or identify individuals.

RW: This feedback process sounds like Sweetwater's version of *kaizen*. Do you have a suggestion box or do anything else that you use on a daily basis to make small, incremental changes rather than just getting feedback once a year?

JR: It's part of the culture. The Personal Perspective Worksheets deal with the bigger stuff personally and professionally in processes. The smaller sort of stuff happens every day here, percolating up from a Sales Engineer, a neighborhood leader, or in a neighborhood meeting, it just happens constantly. It has to be built into the culture so there's a comfort level and they don't feel discarded when they bring something up.

RW: As you're talking I'm writing down a list of things that are coming to mind that I want to explore and it's growing faster than we can cover them. All this came so far started with me

wanting to know what your job title is and what you do. I'd like to get back to the first question I had planned to ask you after establishing that. Why do you think Chuck started the business?

JR: I think that's a pretty easy question. The very first time I called on Sweetwater a rep took me to his house. That was something I wasn't used to. I walked in and met Chuck, there were dogs sleeping by the stairs. I got a chance to talk with him, I think it was just him at the time. His WHY was that he was a musician and a studio owner and wasn't able to find a company that could help with a sale adequately, to find out what was available, what he should have, and support him after the sale if he had problems or questions or something broke. There were a lot of retailers, and still are sadly, who just sell boxes.

He kind of stumbled into it with the K250 and becoming a dealer for Kurzweil. His idea was that he could provide what he had been missing. He is able to take care of customers long term by actually caring about them and developing relationships, not just selling boxes, but rather being a place where they can call back later and say "Oh, my God, this thing doesn't work" or "I've got this new issue" or ask a question and get to talk to the same guy. I think part of our power as a company is the continuity. Year-to-date I think we're at maybe 4% turnover, which is ridiculously low. Retail turnover is 50, 60, 100%. Our average tenure is well over 5 years, maybe over 6 years at this point. If I'm a customer I have the comfort level of having an inside person that is going to take care of me. That is really it from my perspective. It's really cool to be that person that wasn't there for me. Everyone has had some person along the way that could help them in music. I had someone that was great with guitars that I knew I could trust. That was very powerful until he left. Then I had to figure out what I was going to do after that.

RW: Do you have any impression of when Chuck's vision of helping musicians achieve their dreams kicked in? Was he already focused on that when he was running his recording business, or did it come about after he started selling the K250?

JR: I think it was already happening when he was working as a recording engineer and helping people make their music real. He was running the cables out of the back of his VW bus, mixing it down, and helping them achieve their dreams. That feeds all of us. We have tons and tons of positive customer feedback, I call them love letters. They are extraordinarily powerful as a feedback mechanism for the Sales Engineers because of the difference we get to make in peoples' lives, where they had a dream and we found a way to plug into that, and they are coming back saying how amazing it is, thanking us and telling us they couldn't have done it without us. That is why we do what we do.

RW: I am doing research on how much people are aware of Sweetwater's WHY compared to your HOW. Chuck said it would be OK to circulate during GearFest and pass out questionnaires to visitors and customers. I'm making "Do the Right Thing" buttons and wo;; pass them out as a thank you for their participation.

JR: (laughs) That is awesome. I'd love to find out what you discover.

RW: I was fascinated to discover that you have [David Fuhr](#) working as Senior VP of the Sweetwater Experience and focusing on customer service, [Gerson Rosenbloom](#) integrating the new Sweet Family companies the Sweetwater culture, and [Kelly Byrd](#), Director of Leadership Development and Personal Growth. These type of positions and job titles seem to hint at a business philosophy with a wider perspective than most other companies.

JR: David's primary job is to look out at the customer's experience. We're also looking inside on how we can impact that.

RW: Do you have any suggestions for university music technology programs? There are plenty of programs including Full Sail that feed students' dreams of becoming famous engineers and producers, but I don't see anyone having a music retail program, and that part of the industry is as big as publishing, recording, and live performance.

JR: My degree was in music business and recording technology, I took both tracks. I am amazed and feel very blessed that I'm actually doing what I went to school for. When I went to college I went for business, so I discovered those programs after the fact, because I couldn't stop playing saxophone in the band. At some point along the way I did a studio internship and found out that I liked helping people, so the sales side of things came out of the blue for me. I thought that could be interesting for me because I could apply my passion for music. I was realistic enough to know that I wasn't going to be a rock star. I still have a chance I guess.

RW: Don't give up the dream, Jeff!

JR: (laughs) I spent enough time in the studio to know that I'd still have to get the right break and starve for a long time, and it was easier then than it is now. I was going to get married, so I decided to try this thing, and it wound up being a real blessing for me. I wish that more schools would prepare students for something other than managing a band, publishing, or being a recording engineer. Recording engineering is great, we can all do it, I still do it, I have a Pro Tools HDX system at home, still love doing it, taught my son how to do it and am working with him right now, but what other opportunities are there? That could be working with a manufacturer in any variety of ways, or retail sales, which was really one of the focuses of my program in Wisconsin. Back then it would have been working at Henri's Music or Heid Music up in Appleton Wisconsin, as opposed to moving to L.A. and working at West L.A. Music. Sweetwater, this beast, didn't exist at the time. Now there are some tremendous opportunities where you can take your passion for gear.

We're all gear nerds here, we love this stuff. I go to sales meetings now where we get trained on gear and I want to buy it. My wife, bless her heart, understands that and tolerates me. Even if you've got that passion it's going to be really tough for you to get into recording. There has to be some realism in there, instead of just cranking out students that are going to get an internship someplace and then wind up working in a totally different career away from where their passion was. I wish there were more programs that really prepared them for dealing with humans from the sales side of things. That can come across as a little bit smarmy for some

people, but I think that sales is very honorable. I've been doing it my whole life, I still do it. It's good communication problem solving. That's my definition of sales.

There are a lot of great programs out there, yours being one of them, where we find folks and they're very successful. The best thing that we can do is to get allies, like you, who can help figure out which students might be a good fit, because not everybody is cut out to talk to people all day long. Not everyone is cut out to be in sales, or to promote, or to market, but there are some great opportunities there. I look at my son, he's going to Purdue for mechanical engineering, and I'm thinking that he could be developing products for us, because he loves the gear, it could wind up being his niche, where he can still play and do everything he wants and find a way to apply that passion to something he really cares about. If I had to sell siding all day I'd lose my mind. This is fun.

Something many (most?) students probably haven't thought about much is that they will need to have highly developed communication skills...in every way. That means being able to write in a professional way, type very rapidly, and perhaps the most difficult of all, be comfortable and delighted to speak with hundreds of people every day. Voice to voice and person to person is the most effective way to communicate, period.

RW: When you're home in your studio, are you fantasizing about recording something, putting it on Spotify, and then people will love it and buy your album? Or do you do it for personal satisfaction?

JR: It truly is. For me it is an escape, I don't expect anything to happen with it, I do it for me and my family. There have been a few times that I have been able to apply it. My oldest daughter was a gymnast in high school, and I wrote floor music for her. There was a purpose, it was something I could do that she allowed me to do. My second oldest daughter was a dancer, so I wrote a song for her and had someone else sing it, that she used for a solo dance when she was a senior in high school. My oldest daughter got married last summer, she asked me if I'd write music for their first dance. That was cool. Projects like that are meaningful to me, but honestly for me it's putzing around, it's making music, I tell people around here that it's therapy. If I can play guitar for a while I'm happy.

RW: I think that the future of music in a post-industrial society is to help amateurs make music, and that the instruments today involve technology. I'm trying to help people use the tools whether or not they make hit records. There's nothing cooler than making music. I was on the West Coast last summer and stood in with a group of 50 people playing ukuleles on the beach and singing the old songs.

Well, this has been great, but I am getting the feeling that it could go on forever and I'm sure that you have work to do, so I'll let you go. I really appreciate your taking the time, it's been fascinating to learn something about how Sweetwater works on the inside.

JR: I'm happy to do it. I love what I do, and I love how Sweetwater does what it does. It's honestly fun for me to talk about the things I'm so passionate about.

©2019 Jeff Radke and Robert Willey