

*EITK partners with brands that are providing outstanding customer service experiences. The Brand Spotlight Series showcases innovations and solutions to CX challenges, from many of today's leading brands.*

# BRAND SPOTLIGHT SWEETWATER SOUND

*Why Relationships & Expertise Are Key Components to the Sweetwater Difference*

**Q: Tell us a bit about your background, how you came to be at Sweetwater Sound, and a little bit about your current role.**

My background has been a unique balance of technology and service. I've always had an interest in both. At the same time as I was working in a restaurant as a teenager, I started programming. As personal computers became more mainstream in the late 80's and early 90's, I was developing curriculum and teaching computer courses, as well as consulting.

My technology savvy opened the door for a 15 year tenure at McDonald's Corporation, primarily spent in Customer Satisfaction, Experience, and Insights. I came to appreciate the value of customer service in a successful organization. I learned to leverage technology and strong call center operations to deliver exceptional service. The same technology and contact center not only provided a center of excellence for service, but also provided the insights to influence and improve the business.

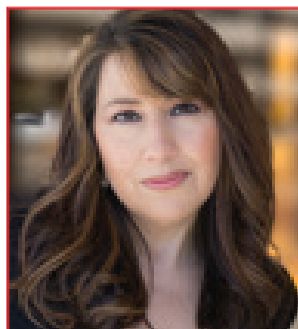
After McDonald's, I held similar positions at handbag and accessory organization, Vera Bradley, and created a multi-channel customer service organization.

My next career move was to Sweetwater Sound which has a near 40-year legacy of exceptional service in retail and has experienced incredible growth of at least 20% or more every year since 2010. It is the number one online retailer of music instruments and audio gear in the U.S. Since customer experience is key to the company's growth, my role was created a few years ago at the executive level, to focus on service in the broadest sense possible.

Across multiple industries, quick service restaurants, handbags and music equipment, the use of technology, balanced with the human element of service, combined with customer insights and measurement, is fundamental to any successful organization.

**Q: Describe the average Sweetwater Sound customer, the importance of exceeding customer expectations, and how service/experience plays into that.**

Sweetwater customers have one thing in common - they are passionate about music in one way or another. There really isn't an "average" Sweetwater customer. One of our customers could be buying the gear to build out a home recording studio, another could be buying her daughter's first drum set, and yet another could be purchasing all of the equipment necessary for a new performance theatre. However, for all of our customers, we have a deep understanding of who they are through deep analytics, a robust, in-house developed CRM system, and most importantly - the relationship we have with them. Although we understand our customer segments and personas, Sweetwater's success is built on the one-to-one relationship of our Sales Engineers with each customer. Every customer has an individual on our sales team that is identified as their music expert to provide information, place an order, or make a return. It's rare in any industry, especially a technical one, to offer unlimited, free support and accessibility to one point of contact. This service differentiation is called the Sweetwater Difference and is a key driver of growth, built on exceeding customer expectations.



**Sweetwater®**  
Music Instruments & Pro Audio

**SALENA SCARDINA**

Senior Vice President,  
Customer Experience

*There is an expectation that all employees, at all levels, have this truly unique understanding of the importance of the customer.*

**Q: At Sweetwater, the telephone is the main channel of communication for customer service. How do you ensure service stays fresh, innovative, and efficient over the phone?**

The telephone is still an important vehicle to the customer relationship and growth. In an average day, Sales Engineers will engage in 20,000 calls, of which 80% are outbound. It is our goal to stay fresh and innovative over the phone and all channels in which we engage with customers. We maintain the exceptional service in several ways. First, every Sales Engineer will go through 13 weeks of Sweetwater University, comprised of 300 classes and 80 instructors, to get the best in pro audio and music instrument training. They will have minimally at least 3 hours weekly of ongoing training throughout their career. In addition, we study phone calls for effectiveness to our “perfect conversation” guidelines and continue to hone our voice engagement with our customers.

**Q: Are there any additional channels that you utilize?**

Sweetwater believes in the human and voice connection with our customers. We are always evaluating which channels to engage in for our business model. For example, the company just launched one-to-one texting where Sales Engineers and customers can directly communicate with one another. However, there is an important balance of our human touch with the company’s strong digital engagement efforts. We are very strategic not to deploy technology for the sake of something new and shiny. We are deliberate in deploying technology enhancements in the customer experience where it makes sense. The company has a highly optimized customer acquisition strategy that includes paid and organic search, combined with ongoing creation and delivery of original Sweetwater content. The volume and quality of video content we produce is another piece of the Sweetwater Difference.

**“We are very strategic not to deploy technology for the sake of something new and shiny. We are deliberate in deploying technology enhancements in the customer experience where it makes sense.”**



**Q: Tell me more about Sweetwater University and the training process employees go through. What stands out to you about this process and what elements do you feel are the most important?**

This 13-week training clearly teaches technology; we call it the “master’s degree of pro audio.” In addition, the classes go beyond just music equipment. We focus on selling, relationship building, fundamentals of time management, and other classes, to teach the whole employee, not just the selling elements. After graduating Sweetwater University, each week the sales team attends 3 hours of ongoing training, focused on perfecting call engagement, new enhancements with our CRM system, and presentations from our vendors on new products. We believe you are never done learning and we also believe in training the whole person.

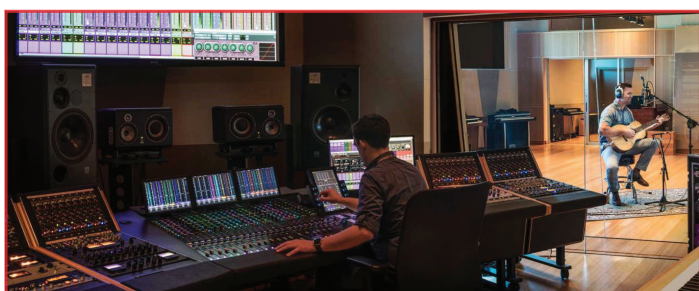
Particularly, what stands out to me in the SWU is the well-rounded faculty. Instructors include department heads, vendor partners, and tenured Sales Engineers. It’s as much about the content and rigor of the program, as it is to get the best preparation to deliver the Sweetwater experience for our customers.

**Q: What keeps Sweetwater Sound special and above the competition?**

Sweetwater is focused on a strong offensive strategy of customer experience. Although we are aware of our competition, our decisions are not driven by the marketplace competitors, rather by our long-term strategy of sustainable growth. We study the best companies in other industries and create our own formula for success.

**Q: Can you talk a bit about personalization, why you feel it’s become such a focus, and what Sweetwater Sound is doing in this regard to tailor their experiences?**

To truly offer personalization of service, including product offering and content, you have to understand your customer. Plain and simple.



Customers want to be understood and if they've taken the time through a verbal engagement or a digital experience, they expect companies to take note and learn more about them. The company has built the systems to gain a deep understanding of customers through their online behavior, as well as through their relationship with the dedicated Sales Engineer. The relationship is key to offering a higher level of personalization. This has become a newer focus for many companies, but it has always been in the DNA since Sweetwater's founding almost 40 years ago.

**Q: How would you describe Sweetwater Sound's culture? How does your brand build/maintain a consistent culture and employee engagement?**

Sweetwater's culture is one of customer service excellence. There is a collective focus on always doing the right thing in reference to serving the customer. In an organization that is expected to generate \$750 million in 2018, the owner and founder, Chuck Surack, still reads and responds to customer feedback daily, for example. There is an expectation that all employees, at all levels, have this truly unique understanding of the importance of the customer. There aren't levels of hierarchy as you would expect in most companies this size. The owner is connected to the customers at such a unique level because there is a general level of care that is in the culture, which is set from the executive team. Since he is a musician, who regularly performs locally in Fort Wayne, as are a good percentage of the other 1,300 employees, the company culture is really one of musicians serving other musicians.

**Q: What's your take on AI and the role it's playing in transforming the customer experience?**

We see the value in AI as one to support and assist in building and maintaining the customer relationship, but not replacing it. As with all of the in-house development and customization of our systems (we have dozens of in-house developers focused on just the CRM system), we look at the advances in technology to help our teams get smarter about engaging with our customers. It's an exciting time to be in the service industry, as the ancillary effort and time to connect, offer expertise, and resolve issues, could be more effective and efficient. The music industry, which is highly technical, with Sweetwater carrying nearly 30,000 skus, can truly benefit from AI; from product suggestions, to system design, to technical support.

**Q: Is there one thing you're proud of that your team or the company achieved in the last year or so?**

Of course I'm proud of being named Music Inc.'s Retailer of the Year. I'm proud that Sweetwater has held true to the relationship model of offering expertise from one musician to another. Although we continue to deploy enhancements to the experience, and utilize the current technology of digital customer engagement, it's not at the cost of the relationship. Literally thousands of connections are made each day to strengthen the brand and many companies just dream of this type of culture and customer focus. This is really a point of pride for our company.

**Q: Predictions for 2018. What do you think will be the main focus for customer experience for the rest of 2018 and into the future, either for the industry in general, or specifically for Sweetwater Sound?**

I predict 2018 will be another year of change for customer expectations. The way companies respond and the roadmaps they create around the customer experience should be urgent and laser focused. The service and experience expectations continue to be set by those companies that are taking advantage of the rapid technology advances in mobile and digital, and show customers what a great experience looks like, regardless of the industry. Sweetwater will continue to be a leader among those companies that are disrupting customer experience. I predict the growth engine to continue to hum along for another year of gaining market share and serving customers in its very unique way.



**Execs In The Know**

*Thank you to Salena and the Sweetwater Sound team for taking part in this EITK Brand Spotlight. Stay tuned for more Spotlights coming your way in 2018!*

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