A Data-Driven Look at the Piano Service Industry, Part 1

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 Ever since the beginning of my career as a piano technician, I’ve heard various things about the piano service industry. Things like, “you can only make so much as a piano tech,” or, “the only way to succeed is to run your business this way.” While I’ve come to understand that those were the opinions and experiences of certain individuals, their statements got me thinking. Are there specific trends we can see among piano technicians?

 In November of 2022, I sent out a survey link to as many piano technicians as I could to find out. The link was shared via PTG’s my.ptg.org site, Facebook groups for piano technicians, and individuals who helped me spread the word. I want to be clear up front: this survey was my research project, it was not commissioned by the Piano Technicians Guild, nor was it limited to PTG members only, though I did try to focus on PTG members. I am not a professional researcher. However, the results of the survey are very interesting, and I’m happy to share them with you here.

 279 responses were received. Given the approximate number of piano tuners in the United States and Canada (8,300), the 279 responses give a confidence level of 95% (the industry standard), and an approximate 5.5% margin of error. 1 All replies were completely anonymous.

 This month we’ll look at the overall results of the survey. Next month we’ll take a deep dive into some of the data. At the end of this series a link will be provided for you to view the data yourself if you want to.

**Question 1:** How long have you been servicing pianos for clients for pay?

* Not Started Yet: 1.4%
* 0-1 Years: 4.3%
* 2-4 Years: 6.8%
* 5-9 Years: 10.0%
* 10-14 Years: 9.7%
* 15-24 Years: 15.4%
* 25-34 Years: 11.5%
* 35 Years or Longer: 40.9%

**Question 2:** What is your gender?

* Male: 81.7%
* Female: 18.3%

**Question 3:** How old are you?

* 18-24: 2.2%
* 25-34: 10.8%
* 35-49: 19.3%
* 50-64: 22.2%
* 65 or Older: 45.5%

**Question 4:** Are you a member of the Piano Technicians Guild?

* Yes: 91.7%
* No: 4.7%
* Former Member: 3.6%

**Question 5:** If you’re a member of PTG, are you a…

* RPT Member: 60.2%
* Non-RPT Member: 32.6%
* Not a Member / Former Member: 7.2%

**Question 6:** Do you have any kind of formal training? (Multiple answers were allowed for this question. Only the overall results are shown here.)

* No: 10.4%
* In-Person Trade School: 33.7%
* Correspondence or Online Course: 24.0%
* Apprenticeship: 44.4%
* Factory or Dealership Training: 25.4%
* Other: 15.8%

**Question 7:** How many pianos do you service in a typical day?

* 1: 16.1%
* 2: 19.4%
* 3: 26.2%
* 4 or more: 22.2%
* I work in rebuilding and don’t usually service in-home pianos: 5.3%
* N / A (I’m Retired): 10.8%

**Question 8:** How many days a week do you usually work on pianos?

* 1: 5.0%
* 2: 7.5%
* 3: 11.8%
* 4: 12.2%
* 5: 33.0%
* 6: 18.3%
* 7: 3.6%
* N / A (I’m Retired): 8.6%

**Question 9:** Do you…

* Work primarily as a W-2 employee: 11.1 %
* Work primarily as a sole proprietor / single-member LLC or S-Corp (self-employed): 74.2%
* Lead a team of at least one technician besides yourself: 6.8%
* N / A (I’m Retired): 7.9%

**Question 10:** How much do you charge for a basic tuning call? (This question is not in violation of our anti-trust policy or anti-trust laws, as it is simply reporting voluntary information gathered from anonymous sources spread across America and Canada. The answers you see should not be construed as telling you how much to charge; only you can determine what’s right for your business.)

* Under $100: 2.9%
* $100-$125: 13.6%
* $130-$150: 22.9%
* $155-$175: 18.6%
* $180-$200: 21.1%
* $205-$225: 6.8%
* $230-$250: 4.3%
* Over $250: 2.2%
* N / A (I’m Retired): 6.8%
* N / A (I’m a Rebuilder): 0.8%

**Question 11:** What is your business model? (Multiple answers were allowed for this question. Only the overall results are shown here.)

* A la Carte (Charge by the Item): 61.3%
* Full-Service Appointments: 33%
* Subscription Based Service: 1.4%
* Rebuilding / Restoration: 16.1 %
* N / A (I’m Retired): 7.9%
* Other: 5.4%

**Question 12:** Would you describe your service area as primarily…

* Urban: 27.2%
* Suburban: 52.7%
* Rural: 14.7%
* Other: 5.4%

**Question 13:** How much do you typically gross a year from piano work only?

* $0-$10,000: 12.2%
* $10,000-$20,000: 9.3%
* $20,000-$35,000: 7.2%
* $35,000-$50,000: 12.5%
* $50,000-$75,000: 16.5%
* $75,000-$100,000: 16.8%
* $100,000-$125,000: 13.3%
* $125,000-$150,000: 3.9%
* $150,000-$175,000: 2.5%
* $175,000-$200,000: 2.2%
* Over $200,000: 3.6%

**Question 14:** About how much do you spend a year in piano parts, tools, and supplies, not including vehicle expenses (your business expenses, not necessarily all your tax write-offs)?

* $0-$1,000: 27.6%
* $1,000-$2,000: 15.8%
* $2,000-$5,000: 20.4%
* $5,000-$7,000: 7.5%
* $7,000-$10,000: 6.5%
* $10,000-$15,000: 5.4%
* $15,000-$25,000: 2.2%
* $25,000-$35,000: 2.1%
* $35,000-$50,000: 1.1%
* Over $50,000: 3.2%
* N / A (I’m an employee or retired): 8.2%

The following questions had write-in answers. I’ve summarized the answers as trends developed. Individual comments will be made available at the end of this series with the rest of the data.

**Question 15:** What is your number one concern about your business?

* No response given / No concerns: 28.3%
* Trouble finding a replacement, help, or someone to refer clients to: 10.0%
* My physical abilities: 9.3%
* Growing my business: 7.5%
* I’m too busy: 6.4%
* I feel like I can’t charge enough or be profitable: 6.0%
* Work / life balance: 3.2%
* Organizing my business: 2.9%
* Getting repeat business: 2.9%
* Customer satisfaction: 2.9%
* Gaining experience and quality in-person training: 2.5%
* Moving towards retirement: 2.5%
* Too many keyboards, not as many pianos as there used to be: 2.2%
* Quality: 1.8%
* Pianos aren’t used enough / not enough pianos in my area: 1.8%
* The local economy: 1.8%
* Vehicle expenses: 1.8%
* All other comments: 6.2%

**Question 16:** What is your number one concern about our industry?

* No response given / No concerns: 24.7%
* The piano industry is dying and a lack of interest in the piano in general: 17.2%
* Training and quality of the next generation: 16.4%
* The lack of young people and replacements: 13.6%
* A lack of professionalism: 5.7%
* Leadership (or the lack thereof) within the industry, PTG in particular: 3.2%
* Quality and cost of modern pianos: 2.5%
* Low pay: 2.5%
* Keyboards replacing pianos: 2.2%
* Lack of industry innovation: 1.4%
* Educating piano owners: 1.4%
* Aging technicians: 1.4%
* Lack of diversity: 1.1%
* The cost of learning and getting started: 1.1%
* Bad information on the internet: 1.1%
* All other comments: 4.5%

**Question 17:** Anything else you would like to add?

 Republishing all the replies is beyond the scope of this article, but there were several categories that seemed to develope. The first category was an attitude of gratitude. The respondents were thankful to contribute to society in a way that brings joy to our clients; thankful for the chance to work on pianos; thankful to be able to have fun while at work; thankful for the life it allowed them to build. As one respondent put it, “I am very blessed to be working in this industry.”

 The second category is the opposite of the first, and consisted of respondents complaining about various aspects of the piano service industry. They felt ostracized at meetings or shamed when they offered an opinion. They felt like the industry wasn’t welcoming to their “type.” Others felt PTG was no longer relevant to them and it would be easier to “go it alone.” Personally, I feel saddened when I read these comments. I can’t help but wonder how many stories would be different if we were each a little more humble, more willing to listen than to assert our opinions, and more willing to reach out to those we haven’t seen in a while and invite them in again.

 The third category can be summed up well by the following comment: “Piano technicians need to understand they are in business! Every other business is devoted to increasing earnings, increasing profit margins, increasing market share, etc. It seems many technicians feel piano work is their lot in life, to improve pianos, help others, make a piano perfect, and not charge too much. Too much of the ‘money is the root of all evil’2 mindset!”

 The fourth category consisted of comments that aren’t easily categorized. Respondents commented on the effects of technology on the learning process; the need for professional community; ideas to improve PTG and reports of how PTG has helped them grow; wishing they had gotten into piano servicing earlier; and more.

 For those who’ve always wondered, I hope you found this data as interesting as I did.

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1 <https://www.surveymonkey.com/mp/sample-size-calculator/>

2 For those unfamiliar with the reference, it is an intentional misquoting of the Biblical verse 1 Timothy 6:10, “For the *love* of money is the root of all evil….” (emphasis added)