

GO BACK TO SCHOOL!

THERE'S A SOLID CORE OF FREQUENT PLAYERS RIGHT IN YOUR COMMUNITY THAT'S ALL SET TO BUY WHAT YOU HAVE TO SELL.

BY STEVE MILANO

HERE'S SOMETHING YOU MAY NOT KNOW: State and local governments across the U.S. annually provide free tennis programs to more than 300,000 players—at no cost. These programs include coaching, daily practices, balls, uniforms, transportation, league play, regional and state playoffs, and awards—at no cost. And these programs keep players on the court five to six times per week during their season for as long as six years—at no cost.

Did I mention this is all done at no cost—to either the players or the tennis industry?

High school tennis comprises one of the most lucrative markets for the tennis industry. And it doesn't cost the industry a dime out of the USTA's, TIA's or any manufacturer's budget. Look at the numbers. The sales and revenues created by this market segment are impressive.

- If two-thirds of these players buy a new pair of shoes each season, at an average cost of \$60, that's more than \$12 million in footwear sales each year.
- If only one in four of these players buys a racquet each year at an average cost of \$100, that's \$7.5 million in racquet sales.
- If half of high school players break a string during the season, they'll spend \$2.7 million in string sales.
- If each team spends \$150 on three cases of balls per season, that's \$1.5 million in ball sales.
- If only 10 percent of high school players take a private lesson once a week during a 12-week season, at a cost of \$30 per hour, that translates into \$10.8 million dollars worth of lesson fees for local pros.
- If 25 percent of players buy an equipment bag at \$50, they'll spend \$3.75 million.
- If each team provides a uniform T-shirt or collared shirt to each player at an average cost of \$10, and if half of these teams provide shorts or skirts at an average cost of \$15, and if each player buys another pair of shorts and a two T-shirts at the same price, this translates to \$15.75 million in apparel sales.

Add in the dollars spent by schools on court resurfacing, nets, windscreens, ball machines, wages paid to the local teaching pros

who coach high school teams on the side, and the dollars spent by players on grips, overwraps, vibration dampeners, videos, etc., and the numbers point to one, obvious fact. American schools are creating for the tennis industry—free of charge—a program that generates tens of millions of dollars in product and services sales.

While the tennis industry has not yet found a coordinated way to become involved with the high school tennis phenomenon on a national level, local retailers can take advantage of this stable, lucrative market with a little creative marketing. Here are some guidelines to help you increase your sales to high school players, coaches and schools.

■ **MAKE CONTACT WITH TEAMS IN YOUR AREA:** Your first step is to call the local high schools within your shop's effective buying area. Contact the school's athletic director to get the tennis teams' schedules and contact information for the coaches. Find out from the coach when he or she begins to plan for the season, and what his or her product needs (balls, nets, uniforms, ball machine, etc.) and budget will be for the season.

If you are able to offer preseason or on-going clinics to teams, find out what the league rules are governing outside tennis teachers. You'd be surprised to learn that some states prohibit volunteers from working with high school athletes, while local conferences prohibit group lessons outside of team practices.

Be prepared for questions about uniforms and have prices on T-shirts and collared shirts. Ask if the conference has any policies regarding advertising, as you may want to work with your manufacturer's rep to name-drop the school's logo on a company's pre-printed T's for better prices. Ask if the coach hosts a tournament in the event that you want the tournament T-shirt business.

■ **GET THE COACH ON YOUR SIDE:** Sponsor your local high school coaches, either with low-cost or at-cost product packages or through one of your manufacturer's reps. You may want to consider a referral program, with coaches earning points or credit whenever one of his or her players makes a purchase at your store. Make sure, though, that you and the coach check with any local laws and with the athletic conference regarding any regulations on sponsorship of school coaches.

■ **TRY TO GET A TEAM ORDER:** Rather than trying to get high

school players into your shop one at a time throughout the year, make an effort to get a team order placed prior to the beginning of the season. Prepare a flier, with prices for racquets, shoes, strings, overwraps, vibration dampeners, bags, T-shirts, shorts, skirts and socks. Include the suggested retail price and any discounts you are offering to team members. Also include an order form that asks for the player's name, clothing and shoe sizes, and a phone number (in case you have any questions about their orders). The order form should list the prices for individual products, tax (provide your area's tax rate) and an area for a grand total.

If you have these products on your Web site, put your Web address on the flier. Get extra product catalogs from your local reps, if possible, and give them to the coach, so players can see what they're ordering. Make sure you give the coach a date by which players should submit their orders and let the coach know you will pick up and deliver the team order.

If you can offer an evening or weekend clinic, pizza party or other event, inviting a number of area teams and their friends, you will increase your exposure even more.

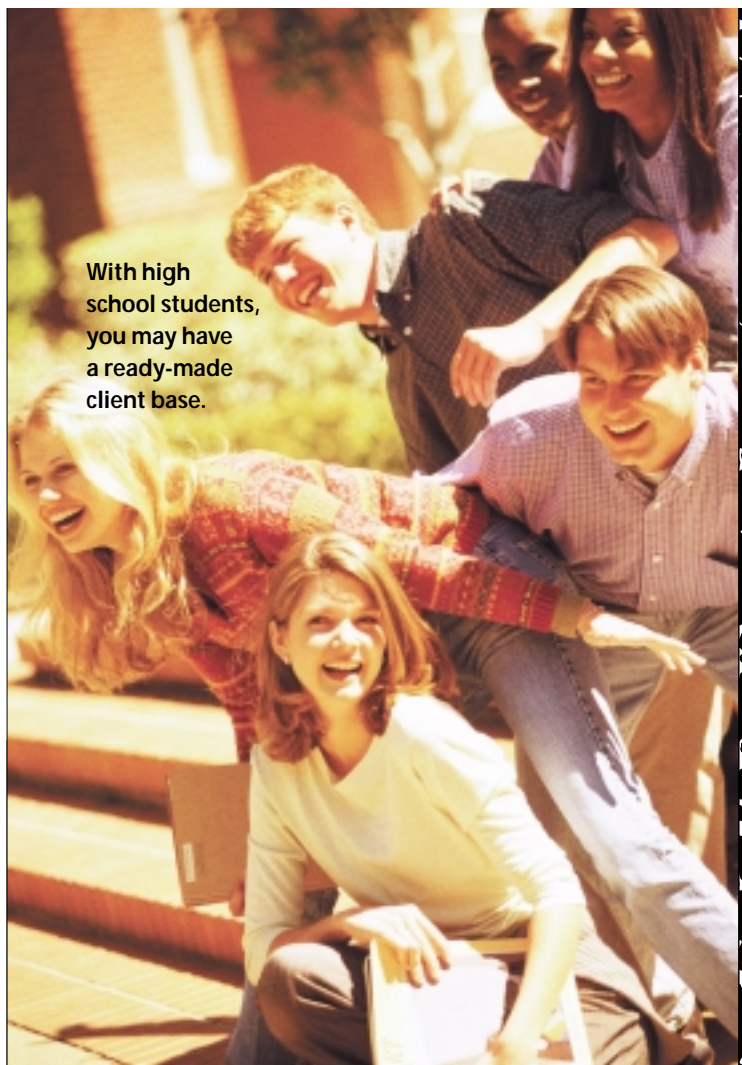
■ **OFFER LESSON PACKAGES:** High school programs range in size from eight players to dozens, depending on the coach's cut policy, if there are varsity and junior varsity programs, the school's budget, etc. If the conference allows it, give a pre- or early-season clinic or presentation during a team practice, reviewing stroke and strategy fundamentals. This allows you to introduce yourself to the players and demonstrate your expertise.

■ **HOLD A "GEAR GAB":** During the first week of the season, arrange with the coach a visit during practice where you can explain the different types of products. For example, tell players with heavy topspin what types of strings are best for their game, what the recommended tension for their frames should be, etc.

Offer a racquet tune-up special, with a restringing, grip or overwrap and vibration dampener at a special price.

■ **PROMOTE CLOSE-OUTS:** Top junior players often can't play high school tennis because of conflicts between their state's governing athletic body's rules and their need to play USTA tournaments to maintain their rankings.

Many high school players are avid recreational players who do not require the latest, top-of-the-line product. Additionally, many high school players won't be able to afford a \$200 frame or \$100 pair of shoes. Promote product packages that include your close-outs so players can buy a number of high-quality products at a much lower cost than they might have expected.



With high school students, you may have a ready-made client base.

Work with your manufacturer's reps to see what is being closed out and if you can put together a package.

■ **MAKE IT EASY FOR HIGH SCHOOL PLAYERS TO FIND YOU:** If you let high school players know you are out there, that you offer equipment support and advice and that you make buying high-quality products affordable, you can position your store to take advantage of not only these frequent players, but their family members and friends.

Start planning your strategies for targeting this market segment today and develop a new, long-term and stable piece of the local tennis pie. ■

Steve Milano is the executive director of the U.S. High School Tennis Coaches Association, located at www.ushtca.org.

Reach 'Em On The Web!

Teenagers live on the Internet. If you have a Web site, adding a team page will drive traffic to your site from players, parents, friends and the media. Include the following on each team page:

- Coach's name and bio.
- Roster of players.
- Team photo.
- Season schedule.
- Results of each match.
- Up-to-date conference standings.

- Link to the high school.
- Links to articles on the team that appear in the local paper.
- Tennis tips from your staff or local teaching pros.
- Links to popular tennis sites.
- Product pages for your shop, which include specials, close-outs and packages.

Make sure the coach or one of the team members e-mails you the results of each match so you can update the site. If possible, posting the conference stand-

ings throughout the season will significantly increase traffic.

If you are aggressively seeking to do mail order via your Web site, adding a conference page, with individual team pages, will increase traffic even more.

Make sure that any links you provide at your site are pop-up boxes, so that visitors do not leave your site when they visit these links.

Remember, once you build a team or conference page, all you have to do for future seasons is update the information.