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Stefan Hard / Staff Photo Paul Perley works to repair the cracked top of a cello recently in his Paul Perley Cellos shop in Berlin.

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By Daniel Staples
Staff Writer - Published: April 11, 2011

BERLIN — As more people turn to the Internet to find specialized products, Vermont's business community is using a model for success that allows them to relinquish the storefront and replace it with a computer monitor.

Paul and Melissa Perley, of Berlin, have been operating their business, Paul Perley Cellos — which restores and sells fine string instruments — from a small workshop that sits just a few feet from their front door.

The couple, who have been in business since 1988, said that the business changed in 2004 when they started the website www.paulperleycellos.com in order to reach a wider audience.

Since the website went up the Perleys have worked with customers in 49 states and eight foreign countries, all without having to leave the comfort of their home

"The internet is central to what we are able to do," said Melissa. "It has allowed us to live at the end of a dirt road and still manage to do business globally."

"I think of the website as being alive," Melissa said. "Our customers really have an opportunity to learn about the instrument."

"In the morning, we check the email and are able to connect to people around the world," Paul said.

Because many musicians like to try it before they buy it, the Perleys are happy to ship an instrument and let people try it out.

"Our customers trust us," Paul said. "We try to establish that relationship and make it as tailored to what the customers want and who they are."

"My parents' business had a storefront, but they were a slave to that," Melissa said, explaining how difficult it can be to man a storefront all the time.

"We have the opportunity to run a successful business, but it does not run us," Paul said.

The Perleys said that they can operate their business, but if they decided to take a few hours to go for a bike ride, they can.

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Although there are freedoms that come with operating a web-based business, there are also some drawbacks.

"There are times that we are answering emails at 11 o'clock at night," Melissa said.

Although the Perleys use the internet for much of the interface with customers, the success of the business centers on restoration of fine instruments — which, when they find their way to the shop, are not always recognizable as such.

Paul, who has a background in cabinetry and studied under luthier Thurmond Knight, said that each instrument is inspected for a number of defects that come with age, including cracks and checks in the wood, the condition of the neck, pegbox, pegs, scroll, sound posts and finishes.

If the body of the instrument is cracking, it is reinforced from the inside with layers of veneer that are carefully glued in place then planed down to match the wood in the area of the repair.

After the body of the instrument has been repaired, the top of the instrument, where the sound post is positioned, is reinforced.

Next, Paul sets the neck back into position and places the top back on the body.

The final touches come with the repair of the finish, which Paul meticulously matches with pigmented shellac flakes.

"There isn't any instrument that doesn't have something done to it to make it better, whether it's a complete restoration or a new set of strings," said Melissa.

"I liken luthiers to surgeons," said Melissa. "When they take the top off a cello, it's like opening up a patient. Every time a top comes off there is a chance that the instrument will never sound the same."

Although the Perleys rely on the internet to connect with customers, they both agreed that the key to their success is in the service they provide.

"We know the instruments and how they are supposed to play," said Paul. "There are very few shops in the world that specialize in basses and cellos."

It helps that both Paul and Melissa are seasoned cello players themselves and still perform together and in area orchestras.

"The beauty of our small business is that when someone calls, they are speaking to the person who owns the business and they like that," Melissa said.

Despite the many conveniences that come with operating a business through the internet, there are some aspects of the web that can prove daunting, including being found when someone is searching for a cello or bass on the internet and maintaining a website so that information is current.

For some of the technical help, the Perleys have professional consults, but they are very active with producing the material that is placed on the webpage, including a column they update regularly called Cello Chatter, which contains articles about the cello, including topics such as myths, strings for cellos, purchasing and maintenance.



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