



By Jim Basara - GJD Contributor

Breaking into the guitar manufacturing industry is about as difficult as breaking into the automobile industry. The public has generally locked in on a few brands and all of the hundreds of other builders fight over the buyers who are willing to look at other brands and try to produce guitars that persuade Fender and Gibson players to try something new. It's a daunting business proposition which is why there are so many builders who fail to penetrate the market in a meaningful way.

XOX Audio Tools announced their new guitar, called The Handle, well before the production models were due to be available. The Handle is an all carbon fiber guitar that is sleek in its design and claims to have acoustical advantages over its wood competitors. Its multi-thousand dollar price tag lands it firmly in the professional level guitar category, making market penetration even tougher. This category is owned by the large brands and by a plethora of boutique manufacturers who each have their own small clientele.

At the same time, XOX announced that they were pre-selling a limited edition run of 100 numbered guitars, prior to production availability. Hmmmm, a company that nobody has ever heard of, and has never before produced a single guitar, selling a multi-thousand dollar instrument that buyers can't play yet. Right, that'll work.

Shockingly, to this writer at least, XOX has announced that they have completely sold out of the limited edition run, with the final instrument, Number 100, being reserved for the [eBay charity auction](#) to benefit Guitars Not Guns. On the news, GJD caught up with Peter Solomon, one of the XOX founders, in Milan Italy to discuss the company, their market entry approach, and their experience to date. Their story is a fascinating and educational story of how to follow a dream and use the Internet world to launch a successful business.

GJD: Peter, first of all, congratulations on your incredible feat of selling out your First 100 Limited Edition, without most of the buyers ever having played one. How on earth did you do that?

Peter: To start, we created a guitar that is so different that it does its own advertising. It's not a copy of a Fender or Gibson or something that you can find comparable products as alternatives. It stands out. Our biggest problem was getting people to purchase it without the guitar being available in the shops. For this, we leaned a lot on Internet diffusion. We sent press kits out to everyone in the industry, and we used the thrill of such a unique instrument

design to speak for itself and create a buzz on the Internet.

Naturally, there was a lot of curiosity about how it sounds and how it plays, so we leveraged YouTube and started having different musicians play it. We also used a low-quality steady cam to avoid any suspicion that the demo segments were overdubbed in the studio. It's just an honest video of people playing it in our lab. That really helped to show people that the guitar had great acoustic properties and was not just something cool looking.

The next big thing that happened is that we showed the guitar off at NAMM and Musikmesse, and everyone who played it had nothing but positive things to say. These testimonials then hit the forums and blogs and helped to overcome doubters who were negative on innovation right off the bat, even though they had never played the instrument.

GJD: So, when you first put the word out, you had a bunch of people who were skeptics and probably some that were loyal to traditional wood guitars?

Peter: We were shocked at the level of traditionalism among guitar players. You would think that musicians, particularly in the categories of rock, punk, and other modern genres are rule breakers and would be open to going against the norms. But, when it comes to guitars they are all very Fender and Gibson minded, and they want to talk to you about what kind of wood is being used in the guitar. So, in blogs and forums, most of the people are open minded and are shocked and impressed with how innovative it is, but then you get one traditionalist that jumps in and talks about wood and how for the same money he can buy a vintage Strat. We see some people questioning the goal of innovation and wondering why they need innovation when they can buy a Fender or Gibson. Ironically, Leo Fender was a huge innovator in the industry and took the instrument in a new direction. Since then, innovation in the guitar industry has been minor. We're trying to make a giant leap forward, not unlike the level of innovation that Leo gave us.

GJD: And how did you overcome those traditionalists?

Peter: We had to convince a lot of people that we used all carbon fiber, not because it looks cool, but because we feel it offers a lot of advantages, including its acoustic capabilities. We monitored all the blogs and forums that we could find, and when we saw someone speak negatively about the concept, we would jump in and bring the conversation back to the fact that we're producing something new and different, that we believe advances the industry in many ways. We also answered every question that came to us openly and honestly. This is how we were able to attract the early adopters who were captivated and intrigued with the revolutionary design and futuristic aspects of the instrument.

GJD: Any specific examples of forum exchanges come to mind?

Peter: Sure, there are a bunch of them. We've been discussed on a few manufacturer blogs, like the Parker blog. Parker fans are already rule-breakers by the fact that they've gone with Parker. So, there was a lot of positive discussion about our design and then someone would question why we're not using wood in certain places, which would trigger a bunch of

skeptical discussion. So, I wrote in and said wait a minute. You guys are Parker fans. How come you're not open to trying something new? At that point, they essentially said you're right. We believe in Parker, so we should be more optimistic about the direction XOX is going.

GJD: When you contribute to these blogs and forums, do you do so anonymously?

Peter: Absolutely not. We always tell people who we are so that they know they are getting information directly from the company and they can ask direct questions. We're not believers in misleading people.

GJD: Did you get into this specifically to create a carbon fiber guitar?

Peter: Not at all. I originally started discussions with a friend, Paolo Storti, who is now my business partner, and we had the idea to develop a revolutionary guitar and present it to another company with which Paolo already had various working collaborations. The way the design came about was like any other design process. I'm an industrial designer, and I design all sorts of things including airplanes, laptops, furniture, office lighting, and roller blades. Whenever I start a project, the first thing I do is a ton of research. I always look to innovate and bring something that's not just innovation for innovation sake, but to bring real improvements to the user that offers advantages over the traditional design of the product. I personally don't see the reason to produce something that is just a slight modification of something already available on the market.

I'm a bad guitar player, but I've played since my youth and knew enough to consider a variety of innovation possibilities and to be able to discuss the instrument with players and engineers. We thought through making something light and comfortable. We were never locked in to carbon fiber. Since I've worked with all kinds of materials, I started to wonder about the possibility of making a guitar from something other than wood to take advantage of higher acoustical characteristics. After going through tons of engineering information, I found out that one of the best materials for acoustical transmission is carbon fiber. This is already known in the industry, which is why carbon fiber is used in some guitar parts with good results. But nobody was using the material in the fashion that I was proposing.

Beyond the material selection, we then went about removing any excess material that didn't positively contribute to the look or sound of the instrument. We kept the basic external profile of a common electric guitar, but we removed all the excess where it wasn't needed. Even in solid wood guitars, excess wood can detract from the sound because any softness in the wood can dampen the sound.

GJD: But aren't there different tonal characteristics between wood and carbon fiber?

Peter: Yes. We did lots of tests with small pieces and by bolting carbon fiber on to various guitars. We found that the carbon fiber gave a tinnier sound, which is why other manufacturers blend the material with wood for balance. We hypothesized that creating a hollow chassis would give us the resonance and tonal qualities we were looking for.

GJD: And did that work right away, or did you have to go through several iterations?

Peter: When the first prototype rolled out, everyone was blown away. We believed it would work, but we weren't really sure. When we made our first prototype and attached the pickups it did everything we had hoped. It had great highs, lows, and mids, and we immediately knew we had something very special.

GJD: Did you have to tweak the pickups at all to compensate for the carbon fiber?

Peter: No. We tried about 20 different pickups and we did a lot of forums with the top manufacturers. In the end, we went with off the shelf DiMarzio PAF Pros. We get a lot of people who say they've never heard those pickups sound as good as they do in our guitar, but for some reason, they just give a great complement to the carbon fiber and our design.

GJD: Were there any compromises made to your theoretical design?

Peter: Only one. We actually decided to 'weaken' the design slightly in order to include a truss rod system. Without the truss rod, the guitar is indestructible. But, the early players of the prototypes felt strongly that a truss rod was necessary to allow each player to set the action to his or her liking. We couldn't ignore that so we decided to incorporate it into the design.

GJD: So then how did you go from designing this guitar aimed for another manufacturer to starting XOX.

Peter: The relationship fell apart over a variety of business issues and due to the company's lack of being able to bring this incredible guitar design to production. At a certain point, I became serious that this innovative design be brought to the market in a way where it would realize its full potential. After we separated from the other manufacturer, we thought about selling the design, but Paolo convinced me that we should produce the guitars ourselves the way we thought they should be made.

GJD: How are you handling manufacturing?

Peter: We are a global organization. Our product development and laboratory facilities are in Milan, Italy. The metal parts are being made by a variety of OEM producers in Italy including the knobs, pickguards, etc. The carbon fiber is being manufactured in Slovakia who specializes in this material. Final assembly is being performed by a famous industrial assembler in the Czech Republic. And all mechanical and electrical components are top quality American and German over-the-counter parts, including names like DiMarzio, Graphtech, D'addario, Planet Waves, Schaller, and Hipshot.

GJD: Wow! That's quite an organization for a new company. How do you manage quality control?

Peter: Quality control is embedded throughout the manufacturing process. Each step of the process exercises quality control over the previous steps and we sample everything. Initially,

until we're sure that everything is working properly, all guitars will go through Italy where they will be individually inspected.

GJD: What about service? Is this a guitar that requires special skills and tools to service?

Peter: Not at all. Any tech who you would trust with a high-end guitar can work on The Handle. The fretboards are from Moses Graphite, who is very well known and respected in the industry. The material acts pretty much like ebony. The frets are standard tang, hardened frets that any skilled luthier can remove and refret.

GJD: I was surprised by the announcement of a limited edition series as the first guitars being manufactured. Normally, companies don't offer limited editions until they've already made a name for themselves.

Peter: Yes. We wanted to give the market something special as a reward for being one of the first to purchase one of our guitars, so we decided to do a run of guitars that are built with the components that we felt worked the best together; in the way that we imagined the guitar ourselves. We're numbering these first one hundred and then we will not number the production guitars any longer.

GJD: What types of component options will be available in the production models?

Peter: We know that customers will want to be able to select their favorite pickups, bridge, tremolo system, etc. and we will have a variety of options available. The limited edition models also come with a blender knob instead of a pickup selector switch, but we will be offering the switch as an option in the production models.

GJD: What about finishes?

Peter: We have a variety of options, starting with the choice of a polished pure carbon fiber exterior or painted matte finish. Our final assembly manufacturer is known for their outstanding quality work, and they would love to put a highly polished lacquer finish on it that is stunning and perfect. Raw carbon fiber is imperfect by its nature. There are slight imperfections and tiny air holes that are present in any carbon fiber motorcycle or other object made of that substance. We love the look and while the material can be painted, we're going to stick with the raw finish and see what the market says about it.

GJD: And what is the current status of production?

Peter: This has been a three year journey, and we've hit a variety of setbacks. But, we decided that it would be better to focus on quality and not put the guitar on the market until we were sure that it was ready and that we had manufacturing set up correctly. The first guitars will hit the U.S. market on April 23rd. Current production is 5 units per week and will climb to 15 per units by next week.

GJD: And tell us about the auction you are having with Guitars Not Guns. How did this come

about?

Peter: The 100th guitar is the last of the limited edition. We were discussing doing something with Guitars Not Guns and felt that this was something we could do that would be meaningful. We're putting a lot into the auction promotion. We went out on the limb because we really believe in the organization. We've been working on this guitar for three years, so we're clearly just getting started and we're not profitable yet. But, we feel strongly enough about the work that Guitars Not Guns is doing that we decided to forgo the revenue on this one guitar to help their organization.

GJD: Finally Peter, tell us about where the company is headed in the future.

Peter: We have a series of other products in development that we are not ready to announce to avoid setting expectations. Our main goal is to innovate on every product we make and to never put a product on the market until it is truly ready. We're not going to put something out there that is just a minor change to something that already exists. We want to take everything we do to the next level.