

Soundings

The Newsletter of Sound Strategies

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Shotgun weddings

Are the increasing number of alliances between musical artists and brands unholy or made in heaven? It is unlikely that anyone knows for sure. Marriage is an appropriate analogy and no-one yet, in the history of civilisation, has ever come up with a fool-proof formula for guaranteeing marital success (or indeed for predicting failure). The music-to-brand business has its fair share of match-makers also, but aspiring partners on both sides should approach with a healthy degree of scepticism.

For one thing, there are almost no statistics linking increased sales directly to a music-brand relationship, though a recent issue of [Billboard.biz](#) reports that Nivea sales in the USA were set to increase by over 10%, apparently as a result of the brand's link-up with Island Def Jam artists. The report does not analyse to what extent the increase might be due to the specific music links or due to the overall effect of the marketing campaign. Perhaps any old music would have done the job just as well.

Most discussions of the precise advantages of music-brand linking tend to lapse into touchy-feely language and vague talk about important qualitative factors. Commentators on both sides of the divide seem unable or unwilling admit to a serious logical distortion: it does not follow from the rather obvious fact of music as a 'good thing' which engages people emotionally, that this feel-good effect will inevitably transfer to anything else associated with the music; nor does it predict any kind of direct correspondence between a music-brand tie-in and increased sales.

Not only has no-one yet proved the case, but the metrics capable of divining any kind of proof have not yet been developed.

There are, however, plenty of theories, strategies and principles, most of which aim to maximise the advantage of the link to the brand in question: the need for a good emotional and lifestyle 'fit', for a long-term relationship, for reciprocal PR, etc.

A smaller number of voices are trumpeting the advantages to emerging artists. A recent [MediaWeek](#) report quotes Tag Records producer Jermaine Dupri lauding a promotional deal with his new associates, Procter & Gamble: "I've never seen someone wanting to devote this much money to breaking new artistes," he said. "Nobody in the music business has the

marketing budget that I have". Though it's possible he's never heard of Ludwig II of Bavaria and his 'sponsorship' of Wagner's operas.

Because of course there's nothing new under the sun. The story of music history across the globe is a story of composers and performers latching onto rich and influential sponsors in order to achieve both security and fame. Four centuries ago it was the church, then the aristocracy, then the state, then publishers and record companies. What self-respecting musician would not be motivated by exactly the same circumstances to look to the obvious 21st century sources: high profile retail brands. It seems that the tail is wagging the dog...

Musicians have ten centuries' experience of insinuating themselves into benefits of the most advantageous financial support. There is no reason to suppose the 21st century will be any different. And they will always find ways to subvert their patrons' agendas, whether cultural, economic or political. So, caveat emptor, any agencies or brands seeking to manipulate the creative power of music. As a brand manager in Japan recently commented during a Sound Strategies presentation: 'I have just realised we are not selling our brand, we are selling Jennifer Lopez'.

Michael Spencer

Blog comments to <http://sound-strategies.typepad.com>

The elephant in the room

When creative people get together to make a new piece of music or theatre or video, the process usually follows one of two routes. Either meaning and message are refined out of a pre-existing subject or the meaning and message of the piece grow out of the artists' manipulation of their materials. In both cases, it is frequently the case that no-one is really sure of the real intention of the piece until it is finished. Most creative artists (in whatever medium) would agree that an important part of their work is to look for meaning, and to give meaning to the materials they use.

The artistry involved in creating advertising for a brand or product can be considerable (and the budget will often be far in excess of what an independent artist could expect to receive as a commission). But there is an important, usually unspoken, difference: the meaning and the message are always predefined, often by people other than the artists who subsequently get to work on the project. The product exists, as does its target 'audience'; its sensory DNA has already been mapped out.

The job of text, image and music is not to explore and synthesise new expressive content but to represent a predetermined agenda. Usually within a predetermined process which often requires the artists to work in series rather than in collaboration. Working in series is a sort of 'pass the parcel process' requiring minimal communication between links in the chain. The potential for misinterpretation is high. So the artists tend to play safe and opt for low-risk, unoriginal solutions which stay well within the restricted aesthetic boundaries necessary for mass appeal.

Imagine if these same artists were allowed to be part of the research and development stage of the product, when they could play with and evolve all the expressive factors which will eventually become the brand DNA. And imagine if, by embarking on such a process, an intended chocolate bar becomes a tube of toothpaste instead...

Andrew Peggie

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What does Christmas sound like on the web?

UK high street stores are already in full Christmas mode. Be prepared for a rash of nervous breakdowns amongst sales staff after having been exposed to six weeks' unrelenting playback of Jingle Bells and Winter Wonderland. (The US army employs similar methods as a torture technique.)

Avoiding seasonal marketing is well-nigh impossible on the high street, but do retailers subject their website visitors to the same onslaught? We paid fleeting visits to several of the UK's best-known retail sites in search of a festive atmosphere, and have to report a disturbing – or gratifying, depending on your point of view – lack of sleigh bells, laughing Santas, snowmen and carol singers.

Large food-based retailers such as Tesco and Morrisons on the whole treat their web pages as an extension of the garish print publicity that gets pushed through letterboxes every other week. Silent pages with minimal animation or interactivity, crammed with cut and paste images of their current product bargains.

Most have set up a dedicated Christmas page, however. [Asda](#), for example, uses glaring primary colours to frame a selection of gift ideas for 'him', 'her' and 'kids'. Then it pushes you straight to Asda Direct to encourage a quick sale. No sound or animation, but the visuals shout loud enough.

[Morrisons](#) has a landing page invitation to view the current seasonal TV commercial featuring huskies pulling a shopping trolley across frozen wastes. The backing track succumbs to seasonal temptation only in the final few seconds when a burst of bells and sparkly percussion give the game away. There are also dedicated Christmas pages containing gems such as [how to be a good host](#).

[Waitrose](#) is rather more ambitious, with a special Christmas home-page built around a tree with twinkling decorations. It also offers seasonal advice in the more ambitious format of 'masterclass' videos. [How to prepare a Christmas turkey](#), for example. A good idea spoiled by the rather dated approach, with an anonymous voice reading from a recipe book and anonymous hands manipulating a dead bird. But Waitrose at least offers an attractive combination of information, gift suggestions, interactive games and multi-media clips. They obviously think of shopping in a much wider experiential context.

A dramatic contrast to their rival grocers, [Sainsbury's](#), whose special Christmas page features a rather desultory Jamie Oliver offering brief recipe tips (downloadable as pdfs) surrounded by links to online buying opportunities. Even Sainsbury's abandons its distinctive brand colours for a predictable garish red-green Christmas backdrop.

The [Tesco](#) site offers a similar package of gift suggestions, recipes and family activities, but creates an unnecessary hurdle by requiring a sign-in or sign-up before access is allowed. They also provide a little count-down calendar which would be even better if it had the facility for individuals to add their own entries. No sound or animation, and the ubiquitous red-green Christmas tree décor becomes ever more tedious...

Only with the [John Lewis Partnership](#) do we experience something of a personal touch, after acres of faux-familiarity and forced-jollity. They offer an entire sub-site of well-organised and comprehensive Christmas planning and buying information not over-larded with seasonal colours. But the best bits are to be found in the JLP online magazine where you can find an endearing [toy demonstration](#) video (there's a link from the landing page) and also everything you need to know about [decorating a Christmas tree](#). Worth spending time with.

Andrew Peggie

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Sound Strategies News

- Videos of Michael Spencer's presentations at the Brainjuicer Oktoberfest Innovation Conferences in Amsterdam and Kingston-upon-Thames (UK) are now available:

<http://www.modubass.eu/brainjuicer/NL/index.html>

<http://www.modubass.eu/brainjuicer/UK/index.html>

- Sound Strategies recently delivered a theoretical underpinning document to Unilever to serve as a starting-point for the sonic profiling of one of their main brands.

Our Expertise

Sound Strategies conducts rigorous analysis of the impact of sound in corporate and brand communications enabling clients to make effective and sustainable decisions that reinforce corporate identity. We design and deliver bespoke training workshops for brand teams.

If you would like to discuss how you could use sound and music to be more effective, please contact Michael at michael.spencer@sound-strategies.co.uk

Sound Strategies Associates

BrainJuicer

<http://www.brainjuicer.com>

Elias Arts

<http://www.eliasarts.com>

Hear Here!

<http://www.hearhere.org.uk>

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If you have a point of view or topical information about any matters relating to the use of sound in the real or virtual worlds and would like to contribute a short article, please email the Soundings editor, Andrew Peggie, at andrew.peggie@sound-strategies.co.uk

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