

Soundings

The Newsletter of Sound Strategies

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[Predicting the future](#) - Michael Spencer on the changes lurking behind the current financial crisis.

[Should brand-music tie-ins have an ethical dimension?](#) - Can a brand ruin a beautiful relationship with the music, asks Andrew Peggie.

[Sound Strategies News](#) - Seminars in for the Ogilvy Group and University of Liverpool.

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Predicting the future

Sudden changes in operating conditions inevitably provoke a flurry of panic/don't panic/I-told-you-so messages and our in-boxes are already beginning to bulge with advice on how to survive the next economic ice-age. Much of it is urging companies not to pull back on their marketing budgets - if only because everyone else will...

But continuing to pump funds into traditional marketing campaigns will not help either. Why? Because the financial crisis is masking a more profound tectonic shift in the consumer landscape. It concerns the various ways people communicate and the opportunities opening up via the internet. Now that faltering revenues are forcing companies to re-think strategies across the board, this is the perfect time to look more deeply at the nature of the market and to test more effective ways of engaging.

How? Sound Strategies survival advice is simple: start listening. The future is in sound.

It is finally starting to move up the design agenda to match the levels of expertise which text and graphics have offered for many years.

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.

But the barrow-boy mentality dies hard. Traditional marketing behaviour is so geared towards shouting messages into the brand maelstrom that is the current advertising environment, that it has almost entirely lost the ability to make any meaningful connections with the people who might eventually be customers. The definition of 'communication' has defaulted to: 'how efficiently can we get our message across to the largest number of people in the smallest possible time?' Propaganda, to all intents and purposes.

Communication is a two-way process, requiring not just a combination of information dissemination and emotional enticement, but an ability to engage with and respond to messages coming in the other direction. Mass markets have developed around the mass media model of a small number of senders broadcasting pre-packaged information to a large number of recipients. The impact of feedback (apart from sales/viewing figures), let alone dialogue, is minimal. But internet access is changing the mass media landscape

profoundly. The communications hierarchy is flattening out; people want dialogue not sales pitches. Establishing a personal identity through consumer brands can no longer be just a passive sell-buy transaction.

And that's where listening comes in. Image and text are well suited to sending carefully crafted messages, but are hopeless for generating real-time dialogue. The web is opening up more and more audio routes which enable, one-to-one communication and instant feedback. Marketing which does not adapt to the democratisation of the mass media is going to become increasingly ineffective. It is not just a question of producing more 'artistic' or sophisticated videos and commercials, but of re-thinking some basic assumptions about the marketing process.

The seeds are already there of course: in initiatives such as viral marketing and in virtual communities like Second Life. But on the whole, businesses appear to be going into hibernation mode. Recent statistics from the [UK Institute of Directors](#) indicate that a quarter of companies do not prepare for future opportunities and risks. Only a third of the 600 business owners interviewed felt that the UK had a forward-thinking culture and 26 per cent admitted losing revenue and profit due to a lack of analysis about future scenarios.

Listening goes hand in hand with those other current buzz-words, 'innovation' and 'networking' □ key elements in surviving the slump, according to many commentators. Listening is primarily a process of being constantly aware, of picking up the myriad signals from the marketplace and tuning into the dynamics of change.

Well-tuned listening tells you not what you want to know but what you need to know. Listening picks up not just the facts and figures but the mood, tone and zeitgeist. At both corporate and individual level, we seem to be lacking an ability to hear and understand. Active, intelligent listening is what good communication is really all about. Which is why at Sound Strategies we emphasise the 'strategies' part as much as the 'sound' part.

Michael Spencer

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

Should brand-music tie-ins have an ethical dimension?

[Wally Olins](#) would doubtless agree. His presentation at the Google Seminar, [The Future of Branding](#) in Zurich last October, outlined five key attitude changes bringing new influences to the brand universe. One is the nature of communication in digital spaces (see above). Another is the sense of time and place which a brand can convey.

Olins was discussing the issues at corporate/global levels, but what about the personal level? One of the reasons music is recognised universally as an important branding element is because of its ability to forge direct emotional links with individuals, reinforcing memories and associations and promoting emotional security and well-being.

The physiological effects of listening to music are also well-known. [John Harlow, writing recently in The Sunday Times](#):

'Doctors found that if a patient listens to 30 minutes a day of their favourite music, it does more than relaxing them mentally □ it also benefits them physically by expanding and clearing blood vessels □ It is believed to work by triggering the

release into the bloodstream of nitric oxide, which helps to prevent the build-up of blood clots and harmful cholesterol. The findings are part of a growing body of research into the effects of music on the human body. Scientists have found that songs by Red Hot Chili Peppers and Madonna can improve endurance, while 18th century symphonies can improve mental focus.'

So we now know exactly what effects certain musical styles will have! Excellent news for advertising executives—maybe!

Of course they are not the only people to take an interest in the manipulative potential of music. Political parties have a long history of appropriating certain songs to underline their message, especially during election campaigns. And if there are so many benefits to music, it follows that there must be some pretty bad effects also. It hasn't taken the military long to discover them.

More from John Harlow in The Sunday Times:

['Michael Miller, director of the Center for Preventive Cardiology at Maryland University](#) also warned that listening to stressful music, which for many in the experiments included heavy metal and rap, can shrink blood vessels by 6% — the same effect, according to previous experiments, as eating a large hamburger. Miller also advised parents to avoid listening to their teenage children's music if it upset them because it could be the aural equivalent of passive smoking.'

The final phrase might be enough to strike if not fear, perhaps some concern, into the hearts of brand managers. What if the carefully chosen music track or recording artist for a brand tie-in were to create the aural equivalent to passive smoking? We can make some assumptions about what kinds of music certain demographics are likely find attractive, but tend to ignore the corollary: if a piece of music has a strong positive effect on some people, it is likely to have an equally strong negative effect on others.

This would not matter if the music in question was heard only by the target audience, but mass media advertising cannot make such distinctions. Of course one solution is to use music so bland and inoffensive that it is unlikely to seriously upset anyone, but that rather defeats the object of a brand-music tie-in, which is to align with a song or artist with an already strong cultural impact: 'iconic' figures, 'classic' tracks.

Of course, no one piece of music is ever going to please everyone all of the time, and avoiding disliked music will always be fruitless exercise. But that is not where the ethical dilemma exists. It centres not on disliked music, but on loved music.

We become strongly attached to certain music; we often refer to it as 'my music', as if it were a personal possession. We are protective of it, often objecting to different ('wrong') interpretations; we try to control the contexts in which we choose to listen to it in order to maximise its emotional impact.

So imagine if we discover a loved tune, perhaps just a bleeding chunk of it, tacked onto a commercial for a chocolate bar or shower gel. Imagine if the piquant memories and associations wrapped up in that tune are forever usurped by a crass association with an everyday grooming product. Imagine the strength of will needed to avoid putting a boot through the television screen. And imagine the negative effect on the perception of the said product—

Andrew Peggie

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Sound Strategies News

- Sound Strategies delivers a special Digital Innovation Seminar at the [Ogilvy Group](#) headquarters in January.
- And in February we travel to Liverpool where the [University of Liverpool Management School](#) has invited us to present a seminar on the topic of 'sound as an integrated positioning tool'.

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

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<http://www.brainjuicer.com>

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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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