

BRAND + ARTIST PARTNERSHIPS

Brand + Artist Partnerships: The Pros & Cons of Cross-Promotion

Berklee College of Music

Holly C. Winn

Abstract

One might be surprised that many marketing tactics that held true a few years ago are still applicable today, even in an ever-changing music landscape. And some are becoming more important for both brands and musicians to consider with competition for attention being fierce due to overly saturated channels (e.g. social media) that have lower barriers to entry. But there are pros and cons for artists working with brands, and it all comes down to finding the right match at the right time.

In this paper, the author will explore the pros and cons for both artists and brands to offer an objective analysis for both parties to keep in mind when considering partnerships in 2020.

Analysis

Enhancing Meaning for Both Products & Music.

Brands are faced with how they engage audiences beyond functionality to build long-term loyalty and perhaps greater frequency of usage (or purchase) by connecting on a higher psychological or emotional level (Dredge, 2016). Music could meet those higher level needs in Maslow's hierarchy such as the need for belonging (McLeod, 2018). Also, music is scientifically linked to memory (Hsu, 2009), which means a brand can tap into nostalgia. Thus, music can be a good option to give more meaning behind a brand.

Some brands have environments that people more naturally have motivation or incentive to listen to music. For example, Turkish Airlines, at one point, had an average of eight weeks between someone booking a flight and traveling. When people are stuck on long flights, listening to music helps pass the

time. In the period before their flight, purchasers were sent an email of tracks chosen from their destination to “get in the mood”. As a result, music listening on the flights spiked (Dredge, 2016).

This may not be hard to believe as both music and vacation trips can be seen as a form of escapism, so there’s some alignment in the purpose. But the opportunity is in not just having people listen to music, but a specific artist’s music. Rather than flyers choosing their own songs, in partnership with an airline, an artist might have some leeway by matching their music to the mood of certain flights where it’s part of a pre-assembled playlist offered to -- note not forced upon -- the flyers and thus increase their listener base.

The airline made your music more of an experience for the flyers by tying it into another experience that was more tangible. Thus, in 2020, the author believes that artist-brand partnership success is going to come in the magic combination of intangible vs. tangible value. Partnerships don’t just work the complementary such as the way or channel through which we receive value, but also in the contradictory of filling in the gap for a more all-encompassing experience.

Ensuring Exclusivity Doesn’t Mean Missed Opportunities.

It can be tempting to take the first offer that’s on the table, and depending on where one’s career is at, he or she might have to take the risk -- but artists should keep in mind that there are different levels of exclusivity, like perhaps the artist can’t associate themselves with a direct competitor but can with a larger product category. Another option is to put a cap on time -- instead of engaging a long-term partnership, make it a one-off promotion where the exclusivity bookends the campaign a few months ahead and a few months after.

The key here is that an artist doesn't want to get stuck in a brand partnership and miss other opportunities that may come along. If a brand is asking for exclusivity from an artist, artists should be able to ask the same of the brand (if the artist has some real clout). Weigh the risks and benefits of every offer considered, and do a little negotiating before locking in a final deal.

Tapping Into Additional Revenue Streams.

With the sales of albums dropping and streaming paying out pennies, artists have had to look for additional revenue streams. Brand partnership deals vary -- but if a commercial is run, an artist can stand to gain from sync license fees. If the artist owns his or her masters, he or she could stand to make a lot of money from the continued playing of the commercial. Now-a-days, it's more about YouTube and Netflix than prime time TV, but artists still get paid for video plays and ad views even with a channel shift.

And it doesn't stop there. If the partnership is strong, artists stand to have brands fund their tours, give them discounts or free merchandise to wear. Costs can add up quickly for an artist trying to gain exposure and tours can be especially expensive -- so having a partner to front some of the costs is not a bad idea. Just be wary that they might try to bite off a piece of that revenue as well. Nothing is for free.

On the brand side, depending on whether a brand cares more about the relevancy of message in a music than the size of an artist's audience itself, could make or break the bank. Larger brands like Pepsi can afford to bring on Britney, Madonna, Michael Jackson, and a slew of other artists. But if the brand isn't as established, an emerging artist may be a better bet. A brand will have to weigh the initial costs against the long-term benefits to determine if the predicted ROI is worth the effort.

Not all partnerships with musicians bring a positive ROI and sometimes brand sentiment can be impacted negatively. For instance, the 2014 Apple iPhone 6 and Apple Watch partnership to provide U2's album free to iTunes users as an automatic download into their libraries which was a \$100 million debacle due to feelings of intrusion from Apple listeners (Kosin, 2017). It's not always whether an artist and brand are a good match, but if the approach is the right approach.

Solidifying a Positive Image with One's Fans/Buyers.

Selling out is less of a concern now than it used to be (Boyd, 2014). A lot of individuals see artists as smart if they think of they start thinking of themselves as brands. In a time where people are aware revenue is low for both albums and streams, it makes sense musicians find other means to supplement their artistry. After all, we're all just trying to make a living doing what we love.

One could say the average individual rising to influencer stardom is just as much selling out, and that has blown up in popularity within the past few years. The influencer marketing space is expected to reach \$10 billion by 2022, up from \$2 billion in 2017, according to Business Insider Intelligence (Brown, 2019).

Still, there may be a few counter-culture crews that still find mainstream music and brand partnerships to be the "death of artistry", because now music is being tailored for a brand purpose or image rather than authentically arising from one's own creative expression. Yet, some might say it takes more creativity to work within restrictions than without -- so it's all subjective.

A musician may lose a few followers, but the gain from the brand partnership probably far outweighs any cost from loss of fans -- since the shift of mindset for many is in on the side of these efforts for the artist to gain more exposure and really clarify “their brand” as a result of engaging another.

As Wolfmother frontman, Andrew Stockdale once said about his band’s tune being used in an Apple ad, “I don’t think anyone can take an ethical or moral higher stance and say that being involved in an Apple ad is too commercial. Everyone is using (Apple’s products).” It comes down to finding a brand that consumers already trust, but it’s an extra perk if you can find a brand that has music engrained in its DNA like American Express, Pepsi, Burberry, and Red Bull (Diaz, Pathak, 2013) -- so that the partnership seems natural and the establishment of its alignment with music has already been solidified.

Increasing Audience Exposure at the Risk of Major Backlash.

With great benefits, comes great risk. Even if an artist has signed an exclusivity agreement and seems like the right fit for the brand image, brands (and artists) still take the risk that the other side might make a mistake -- after all, we’re all human -- that has followers & customers questioning the authenticity of both the brand and artist. For instance, when Alicia Keys tweets from an iPhone even though she, at the time, was the Creative Director for Blackberry (Seifert, 2013). With more consumers becoming wise to paid influencers and the benefits endorsements have for artists that can lead to bias, authenticity is becoming more key.

At first, one might combat by saying that a brand’s own employees can make mistakes as well, but Brenda in the Accounting Department will get less eyeballs and chatter than a celebrity. You take the good with the bad in these types of situations, because you’re trying to tap into a larger audience when including what the other party has fostered. A solid track record of previously good partnerships that have

panned out for both parties is a good indicator of whether one might be up for consideration -- but it's important to know that both sides give up a little control in the arrangement and thus why contracts should be carefully reviewed.

Inspiring Both Sides to Create New Products.

If a brand is in a slump or the creative block, by trying to fit in with an artist's image, it may find a new product (or product line) that merges the two worlds. In fact, in the effort, many artists have contributed their own ideas, saving the brand from having to do all the work itself.

If we look at the relationship between Adidas and Run DMC (Mellery-Pratt, 2014), we can see that even though Run DMC started with a song about a shoe already in existence, they wore them in such a way that made them appealing to a specific target audience. And from that, Adidas springboarded to develop products more around the group and that audience.

The key is not to force a product fit, but perhaps develop a new one (or even a sub-brand) so that the alignment is there. But if a brand is lucky, alignment will be strong from the get-go without either side having to compromise too much.

The risk one might take is that if an artist learns enough about e-commerce and merchandising, he or she may end up moving away to develop their own signature brand (e.g. Rhianna's Fenty) rather than just a product (or product line) under another's. In some cases, the artist's new brand may even become a competitor. An option may be to build the artist's brand under the brand he or she is already endorsed by.

Conclusion

It's hard to judge how successful one campaign and/or partnership will be based on benchmarks of another when so many factors come into play. But it's for sure that the success of a partnership is greatly impacted by timing.

For instance, during the Super Bowl, Doritos was the 2nd most-discussed brand on social following its ad with Chance the Rapper and the Backstreet Boys. Also during the Bowl, Bubly's ad with Michael Buble received 8 billion positive media impressions (Rittenhouse, 2019). Already knowing this TV event would get massive viewership, many brands and artists take advantage of timing. What's going to be important for brands and artists to consider in 2020 is this omnichannel approach of combining traditional and digital channels at just the right time. Traditional channels aren't completely dead; they just need to be reutilized with the primary channel of digital in mind.

Music is a "product" that stands the test of time and can be revitalized for both newer and older generations. One example of how a brand can span across audiences, though not in the music industry specifically, is when Pokemon saw Gen Z on mobile with an affinity for gaming. Pokemon Go evoked nostalgia for millennials and a faux, but also nostalgia in Gen Z when they realized how beloved the characters were -- winning over two generations.

It's going to become more important in 2020 to know Gen Z such as where they're listening, how they're listening, and what other affinities they have that may be great tie-ins. A brand doesn't just need to think of how their products are engaged but how the music from the artist they are considering partnering with is being engaged.

We're in a time where one can access on-demand probably more variety of options than he or she could ever dream. The author predicts that more and more brand-artist partnerships will pop up as a result of needing to join forces to break through the noise. Bottom line is that brand-artist partnerships have their place. They can be hugely beneficial to both parties if the above are considered carefully and the relationship is a really good match when factoring in the four E's: experience, exclusivity, engagement, and emotion.

REFERENCES

- Dredge, S. (2016, June 5). Brands and music: 'We know millennials are logo-averse...' (#midem). *Music Ally*. Retrieved on October 8, 2019 from <https://musically.com/2016/06/05/brands-music-millennials-midem/>
- Seifert, D. (2013, February 11). BlackBerry Creative Director Alicia Keys tweets from iPhone, pins blame on hackers. *The Verge*. Retrieved on October 8, 2019 from <https://www.theverge.com/2013/2/11/3977958/blackberry-creative-director-alicia-keys-tweeting-i-phone-hacked>
- McLeod, S. (2018). Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. *Simply Psychology*. Retrieved on October 8, 2019 from <https://www.simplypsychology.org/maslow.html>
- Hsu, J. (2009, February 24). Music-Memory Connection Found in the Brain. *Live Science*. Retrieved on October 8, 2019 from <https://www.livescience.com/5327-music-memory-connection-brain.html>
- Mellery-Pratt, R. (2014, July 18). Run-D.M.C.'s 'My Adidas' and the Birth of Hip Hop Sneaker Culture. *The Business of Fashion*. Retrieved on October 9, 2019 from <https://www.businessoffashion.com/articles/video/run-d-m-c-s-adidas-birth-hip-hop-sneaker-culture>
- Kosin, M. (2017, September 15). Brand Partnerships That Failed Miserably (And A Few That Worked). *Urbo*. Retrieved on October 9, 2019 from <https://www.urbo.com/content/brand-partnerships-that-failed-miserably-and-a-few-that-worked/>
- Boyd, D. (2014, May 27). 'Selling Out' Is Meaningless. *The Message*. Retrieved on October 9, 2019 from <https://medium.com/message/selling-out-is-meaningless-3450a5bc98d2>
- Brown, E. (2019, June 14). Influencer Marketing Spending Is on the Rise. *ZDNet*. Retrieved on October 9, 2019 from <https://www.zdnet.com/article/influencer-marketing-spending-is-on-the-rise-according-to-new-reports/>

Diaz, A.C., Pathak, S. (2013, September 30). 10 Brands That Made Music Part of Their Marketing DNA.

AdAge. Retrieved on October 9, 2019 from

<https://adage.com/article/special-report-music/10-brands-made-music-part-marketing-dna/244467>

Rittenhouse, L. (2019, March 4). Want Your Brand to Be a Hit With Consumers? Try Partnering With a

Musician. *AdWeek*. Retrieved on October 8, 2019 from

[https://www.adweek.com/brand-marketing/brands-can-unlock-unique-opportunities-in-making-de](https://www.adweek.com/brand-marketing/brands-can-unlock-unique-opportunities-in-making-deals-with-music-artists-if-done-right/)

[als-with-music-artists-if-done-right/](https://www.adweek.com/brand-marketing/brands-can-unlock-unique-opportunities-in-making-deals-with-music-artists-if-done-right/)