

## **An Introduction To Sound Branding**

*By Sam Nicholson*

What does your brand sound like? This question has become increasingly familiar in the advertising world over the last decade. In recent years the quest for an answer has begun to gain traction but is it really worth all the effort? Do brands actually need another string to their identity?

Every day we encounter maybe a hundred brands. If we're surfing the Internet or glued to the television then that number could increase dramatically. Each one has been meticulously designed from the ground up in an effort to raise their head above the rest and wave what they hope is a distinctive and relevant hand at the public. The values that define them provide the corner stones for every aspect of this communication. Upon this foundation, a dedicated graphic designer builds a logo and with it comes, among other things, colour and font. The product and it's packaging also take shape, whether it be a chocolate bar and its wrapper or a bank teller and the space in which they ply their trade. Tag lines, scripts and press releases are carefully fashioned letter by letter by exalted copywriters in their ivory towers. It goes on and you're probably familiar with the picture, it's strategic design to ensure that every time the brand's face pops out at you it's not only relevant and distinctive but also consistent.

The problem is, every time they make a sound it's different and consequently confuses our otherwise steadfast perception. Their visual image is beautifully refined, well kept, approachable but their voice is often unpredictable, incongruous and sometimes utterly unintelligible. The effect this has ranges from the mild surprise and disappointment we all experienced the first time we heard David Beckham's voice (which frankly is a bit girly) slip from his statuesque features to the perplexing thought of having a certified schizophrenic fronting a new romantic ska/metal wedding band. As a brand with an otherwise unfaltering identity you might be better off keeping quiet.

It's hard to imagine the world in a state of perpetual quiet, impossible even. Sound is something that we understand on an instinctive and primal level and use to our advantage on a daily basis both in a conscious and subconscious way. Whether it's coincidental or by design, we use it to help us define who we are, to differentiate ourselves from others and as a basis for relationships. Without it, the environments in which we work and play would lack character and be dangerously unpredictable. In fact, the ability to understand sound is one of the deciding factors in the success of our evolution as human beings.

To put things into context let's start at the very beginning, as Julie Andrews once said, it's a very good place to start. Our relationship with sound begins at 17 weeks in the womb, when we first hear our mother's heartbeat. Suddenly we have a concept of rhythm. It becomes a comfort, a signal that everything is safe and well, that's until it quickens and the muscles tense and we experience our first dose of stress. This effect harks back to our evolutionary forefathers who learned to react to a change in sound and understood that when the birds are singing the coast is clear, it's when they stop that you have to be on your guard. These primal origins result in an instinctive understanding of sound and music that transcends language and culture, a hypothesis that was explored in 2005 by German neurophysicist, Thomas Fritz. He took three simple pieces of piano music, one happy, one sad and one scary and he tested them with the public to validate each emotion. He then led a team deep into the Cameroonian jungle to play the songs to the remote Mafa tribe. The tribe is so isolated that many of them had never heard a piano before, let alone the musical structure in which the songs were written and consequently the songs carried no nostalgic or cultural attachments. Despite this, the results confirmed the hypothesis; there's something inherent in the music that inspires an emotion inside us and that emotion is the same

whether you live deep in the Cameroonian jungle or right in the heart of the urban jungle.

As we grow up, our emotional intuition around music becomes more nuanced and we learn how to turn it to our advantage. Imagine how many times Barry White's seductive tones have been used to create the perfect ambience in the boudoir. We understand instinctively that there are pieces of music and certain styles or voices that create a romantic atmosphere. In branding terms this is powerful, we're conditioning a desired emotional response. We also use it impulsively to match our mood. Bands like the Smiths or Leonard Cohen have sound tracked countless breakups while everybody has their favourite songs to put on when the sun is shining and the weather is sweet (and ones to make you move your dancing feet). Effectively what we're doing is creating a sonic shortcut to our primary emotions. Then we use music to motivate. Just think of The Rocky Theme or Eye Of The Tiger; you regularly see joggers with their headphones in and I guarantee you they're not listening to the sounds of the rainforest. It's motivational but more broadly we're conditioning a desired physical response either in others or in ourselves. In each case we're subconsciously being strategic in our use of music and our strategy more often than not has the aim of making, keeping, or, in a most benevolent way, influencing friends and that's what brands are trying to do every day with their beautifully refined features.

So if a musician, or perhaps more accurately for this purpose, an audio designer, is consciously able to achieve this through music and stylistically can write to a brief, then surely it's possible to reflect the same values as a graphic designer is charged with cramming into a logo or any other piece of brand artwork. If you look at music merely as organised sound, assembled by people who want to convey a message or idea, then musicians working to a brief are effectively graphic designers; they're just using different tools.

The content of the brief will be different and that is one of the major stumbling blocks. While the intended message is the same, the visual and audio arts both employ very different lexicons. CMYK means nothing to a musician while briefing your graphic designer using the pentatonic scale is not going to produce the desired results, in fact it probably won't produce any results at all. The briefs do start from the same place though, the brand. For the purpose of a proper music brief there has to be a brand specific musical glossary, an instruction manual that will inform all aspects of brand communication and give your average brand planner a musical Babel fish designed specifically for interaction with music supervisors and composers. The eventual structure of the sound strategy and all music production thereafter can take many forms and as it's such a nascent science there's no widely accepted process. Nor maybe should there be, but as I'm sure most graphic designers would agree, being given an aimless brief or just a blank page is generally going to end in disappointment for all. Guidelines are essential if expectations are going to be met.

The history of brands' relationship with music is a bit patchy. Commercially released music has been used randomly, impulsively and rarely with any enduring brand relevance. Jingles have floated in and out of fashion, testing the patience of television viewers everywhere. The sonic logo has enjoyed some success; in fact it's the one form of sound branding that you could say has won through. Sponsorship of events, venues and other similar affairs has grown in popularity but often has no relevance and appears to be based on a pin-the-tail-on-the-donkey approach.

A quick look at some recent examples of sonic branding though does reveal some success. To start with the sonic logo seems sensible, as they're probably the most widely recognisable and understood form of sonic branding. The art of creating a sonic logo is a dark one and not embraced or understood by many traditional musicians, it's actually surprisingly unmusical. Take Intel, probably the most identifiable sonic logo of them all. The original composer, Walter Werzowa, had never attempted anything like it before and initially approached the brief from a

traditional angle. It didn't work so he changed his tactics. He rolled 'Intel Inside' over and over in his head until he realised that the words themselves provided a ready made template for the notes, a sketch which now just needed a little refinement and a splash of colour. He looked at everything that Intel stood for and reinterpreted each of those aspects into a simple sound, now he had a colour palette. He then took those sounds and layered them until each note sounded warm, inviting and unobtrusive. The result is that each of those 'boms' is constructed from up to 14 layers of sound including anything from a spark to an anvil being struck. That's what we don't hear but it's what has helped to make those four notes to be understood globally and tied intrinsically and unquestionably to Intel. Nobody really knows what an Intel looks like, but you know exactly what it sounds like.

Recent developments in industry philosophy have even seen the jingle show signs of shaking off its dirty word status. Müller had great success employing 'Nina Simone – I Got Life' as a kind of jingle. They built up good brand association through consistency and then refreshed the sound by re-recording it in a number of different styles. This afforded them the opportunity to match the sound to the communication, to alleviate the level of annoyance experienced through over exposure and also ultimately to save money. It's not perfect but it's getting better.

There is also a brand that seems to get it right on every time, on every level and across every platform, Apple. They understand what it means to express a brand message through music. The late, great, creative luminary Steve Jobs would not have accepted anything less. A quick and somewhat superficial breakdown of Apple's values could read something like this – simplicity, people, quality, innovation, aspirations. One musical interpretation of those could read like this – simple rhythms and melodies, vocals and warm production, clean and polished production, undiscovered artists, magical or otherworldly sounds. Tracks like 'Feist -1234', 'Chairlift – Bruises' and 'Bird & The Bee – La La La' were all used on iPod commercials and all fit this bill (that iPod commercial was the catapult that shot Leslie Feist to global fame). The list goes on and the brand consistency over the last decade is plain to see and hear. The success has even started to breed imitators (see the Amazon Kindle commercial with 'Bibio – Lover's Carvings'). They don't stop there though. The iTunes store ensures that their relationship with music is undeniable and all of the songs they use are promoted, creating a profile for themselves as champions of new music, which subsequently reinforces their reputation for innovation. The iTunes sessions that they sponsor are carefully curated and strengthen their bond with music fans thereby creating fans of their own. By starting with that strategic centre they're able to build a distinctive sound, generate extra revenue streams and an endless cycle of publicity. Even their start-up sound is clean, warm, and somehow unearthly while being reassuringly grounded and by consequence, it's perfectly on brand.

If you consider of a band as a brand, take U2 for example, they have a globally recognisable visual image and consistent sound that has evolved over a career spanning 35 years. Or a producer such as Phil Spector; he created a whole genre from his mixing desk, immediately identifiable and transferrable across any number of artists over the course of nearly half a century. Now think how passionately you feel about your favourite band. That's the power of music and it's still waiting to be harnessed by brands. They have a massive opportunity to create a more complete sensory experience, to build a much stronger emotional connection and to turn consumers into fans, super-fans and if they're lucky, maybe even groupies.