

# Moving from bands to brands.

By Justin Basini

Has anybody noticed that the pop industry has been getting clever, learning from the marketing big boys? Classical marketing and brand building - the not-so-ancient art (or is it science) of creating consumer 'pull' in the selling of ever increasing numbers of essential products and services - is being employed more and more, to great effect, in creative industries. The music business is not generally known for practising this classical marketing technique, instead it has traditionally relied heavily on promotion work and, for the bigger artists, formulaic merchandising to drive volume and incremental profit. As we all know most groups fail but those who succeed tend to burn brightly and then fade into the obscurity. Only on those rare occasions where sufficient talent combines with effective marketing and hard promotional effort do enduring musical 'brands' get created and earn multiple hits.

There have always been the 'manufactured bands', some of the Phil Spector bands, the Bay City Rollers, and the Monkees are examples, but since the late 1980s we have seen more of the charts dominated by bands whose music tends to be generic and whose differentiation, and hence competitive advantage comes from the brand associated with the band. Certainly the happy coincidence of discovering a band of talented individuals playing in a garage or a church hall and turning them into superstars is less and less common. The days of content i.e. the music, being the most important element are long gone. And whilst context, i.e. handsome faces, cool style, and hip clothes, was always important, it is now undoubtedly the most important factor in the majority of sales in the industry. The challenge is now moving increasingly from finding great content to inventing compelling brands. Put simply, an industry that was largely product driven has evolved into a market where differentiation of content is increasingly difficult making the brand more powerful. This means the skill set of the brand-building marketer has become a valuable commodity.

Tried and tested approaches that have proved successful in other sectors now create valuable brands and make money, delivering shareholder value. Building successful pop 'brands', achieved through the 'manufacturing' of bands and musical content, has increasingly become a methodical needs-based process. Brands such as Take That or the Spice Girls demonstrate that identifying and understanding a target market and creating a pop band with essentially generic content designed specifically for that market is a clear route to success in today's pop world. 19 Management, responsible for many big brands such as the Spice Girls, S Club, and most recently Gareth Gates and Will Young, have accounted this year for 23% of all singles sold in the UK charts in 2002. Interestingly this process is becoming ever more dominant as we see every Saturday night with 19 Management's TV shows such as PopStars and Pop Idol. However the most interesting aspect of these shows is that it accentuates the 'discovery' of great singers and persuades us that the 'talent' resides in these voices and bodies thereby legitimising the calculated 'marketing' effect of these shows. Clearly, the unearthing of a 'new star' is one of the least important aspects of creating success. Rather it's the ability of these shows to hold our attention for an hour, binding us to the potential brands held within them that is the most important aspect in driving sales. A shampoo bottle is important, in that it holds the product, but it only has a minor part to play in whether a consumer picks it off the shelf. Likewise consumers might suppose that Gareth and Will are an essential part in the process but in reality it is the brand built around them that drives the sale.

Of course, that happy coincidence of discovering a talented band in a garage does still happen occasionally but marketers have realised that they can't just rely on this in putting cash in the bank. There is simply more money to be made and at lower risk by understanding the market and its needs, and creating products that meet these needs.

So if stage one is the understanding of consumer needs, segmentation and developing product, then the pop industry is racing to use increasingly sophisticated brand and marketing techniques. For example, the success of the S Club franchise illustrates several key areas where growth has been achieved by applying the toolbox of the classical marketer. From their

very creation in 1998 S Club was a manufactured band aimed at a mid-teen audience. The S Club brand represented happy, carefree fun and friendship, values that appealed to the band's target consumers and their parents. And, with seven members of the band there was a 'variant' within the brand to cover every type of consumer within the target audience. Clean living fun delivered by clean living, homely individuals - the Monkees without the bite. Ironically, borrowing from the Monkees, the launch of S Club employed a multiple channel strategy through the creation of a TV series, a key element that allowed the target audience to connect with the 'characters' of the brand. The S Club website contained compelling multimedia content and is evolving all the time to get closer to its target. The music was completely generic, sounding like so many other less successful teen pop bands, but the marketing of the S Club brand has delivered nine hit singles and three Top 3 albums.

So with a successful brand where does the marketer's mind start to wander to keep those sales figures growing? A classically trained shampoo marketer would think of several options, one of which would be brand extension into a new target segment. Never before tried successfully in the pop industry, the rise of the S Club Juniors in 2001 has been a breakthrough in evolution marketing within the pop industry. The core brand franchise has been extended into a younger target audience, pre- and early-teens, by the creation of a new variant made up of eight youngsters. Recruited via a television talent search the move has had several benefits on the overall brand franchise. The S Club brand has now connected even more powerfully with a larger section of the teen and pre-teen market, allowing cross-sell opportunities. Also the creation of the junior variant has allowed the original S Club to mature musically and aim at a slightly older, more sophisticated audience. Since launch, S Club Juniors have had three hit singles and a No 5 album, proving that brand extension, if done with enough thought, works in the music industry. Suddenly a whole new world of opportunities arises.

The creation of manufactured brands and the associated move from content to context, while worrying to a musical purist, proves that the tool bag of the brand-building marketer is alive and well, either consciously or unconsciously, the pop world and that bands have now almost completely given way to brands. The likes of Pete Waterman in the 80s and Simon Fuller and Nicky Chapman over the last decade are marketing and brand building superstars. And what's more, the so-called classical brand marketers can start to learn a lot from them, such as the concept of brand lifecycle. Pop managers are used to creating a great brand, taking the profits while they are stars and then the discarding of that investment when the market moves on. Something which detergent and shampoo marketers still haven't got to grips with as we witness with the perpetual succession of relaunch after relaunch.

Finally what is most interesting, and concerning to some, is that we, the consumer public, are becoming accepting, either consciously or unconsciously, of the role marketing has to play in creating brands that meet our needs in whatever sector we choose to spend money. We increasingly accept that content is less important than the feelings we get from the use of that product. The focus group after the film, in which the audience says they do not like one ending and would prefer another, results in the actual creative content being changed. We vote in our millions to decide whether we would prefer our pop music sung by a 5'6" blonde or a 5'8" brunette. This phenomenon horrifies some, but it is surely an acceptance from both the marketer and consumer that what exists is a symbiosis. Whilst the ability of the marketer to uncover our needs and deliver a brand experience that satisfies these needs remains, then consumers will continue to reward their businesses with purchases. This is the most simple of marketing paradigms and is a truth that spans across industries and sectors with great effect from washing powder to pop music.

Justin Basini, October 2002.