

Sound Branding – The sound of sale

Most organizations have relied almost exclusively on the sense of sight to communicate who they are, what they do and why they matter. Pirates have their unmistakable skull-and-bones flag. Nearly all religions have their own unique symbol. And today, practically every brand on earth has its own visual identity. Other senses are rarely part of the equation.

Yet sound has unquestionable potential in creating impressions. Consider the sonic snippets in your life—imagine *Chariots of Fire* or *Rocky* without music, a PC commercial without that Intel Inside bongggg, or a Harley-Davidson hog without its expertly calibrated tone. Sound triggers recall and reactions. And much like good visual or industrial design, it also has the ability to convey value and strengthen brand reputations.

Forward-thinking brands are catching on. In this first of a two-part series based on my [co-presentation at the “Gain” conference](#) last October, we introduce the practice of audio branding and identity – the intentional use of music, sound and voice to create a connection between people and organizations. And in part two, we will dig deeper with a real-world, case-study look at the recently created audio identity for Sun Microsystems and its ubiquitous Java brand.

Our everyday response to sound

Sound has an immediate, direct link to both the rational and emotional parts of our brain. The sound of a screaming baby will raise your hackles in no time. On the other hand, the sound of a gentle stream or windswept field is more of a feeling—one that’s calm and soothing, perhaps even therapeutic.

None of this is news until you consider the cumulative effect. We’re exposed to hundreds (sometimes thousands) of sounds each day. Our brains sift through all of them, selecting those that deserve a response—usually those that are linked to a benefit or are vital to our survival. Many direct our feelings, thoughts, actions and speech. Sound acts as a filter through which we experience and understand our world.

For those of us in the business of designing brands—the practice of engineering perceptions—our opportunity is to link brands and benefits through the intentional use of music, sound, voice and silence.

Strategic audio in retail and beyond

Many retailers already leverage music as a selling tool. In 1998, Adrian North, David Hargreaves and Jennifer McKendrick ran a test in a British wine shop to determine the role of background music in purchase decisions. For a number of days they piped in French and German music, alternating between the two. The results: on French-music days, the French wine outsold the German wine by a ratio of four to one. On German-music days, German wine outsold the French by a ratio of three to one.

The same team also discovered that customers are likely to tolerate long waiting times (both on the phone and in the real world), if and when the hold/background music is enjoyable and fits our expectations.¹

Muzak anchors its business on retail sound. Decades ago, the North Carolina company served up gentle tones to quell the fears of people riding elevators in early skyscrapers (hence the term “elevator music”). Now Muzak is a leading supplier of licensed music in retail spaces, and brand is their primary value-add. The firm’s “audio architects” design playlists to achieve two effects: first, the music mix must match a retailer’s brand personality; and second, the songs, segues and cumulative feel must provide a specific, intentional energy level for the environment. (Peppy people stick around and spend more.)

Music can also work wonders in advertising: McDonald’s “I’m lovin’ it” audio logo is recognizable by a whopping 93 percent of the people exposed to it.ⁱⁱ It’s also the cornerstone of a global campaign that has seen a significant increase in sales since the campaign’s inception. “We’re not advertising more,” says Larry Light, McDonald’s global marketing officer behind the effort. “What we have increased substantially is the effectiveness of the advertising...when you increase relevance, it sticks in people's minds.”ⁱⁱⁱ

While music certainly has a role in moving the sales meter, there’s more to the story. Just as the color of your hair doesn’t define you as a person, music doesn’t define an entire brand. Audio identity takes into account the totality of a company’s sounds—from the promotional to the functional—and offers a systemic (rather than subjective) approach that ensures brands are perceived the way companies intend them to be perceived.

You might expect advertising agencies and marketing departments—not industrial-design or product development groups—to take the lead in audio branding. While there’s an obvious fit between advertising and sound, not all companies have the marketing prowess of a McDonald’s. And not all depend on advertising to grow relationships with customers; in many cases it’s the products themselves that define a person’s relationship with a company. That’s where software, industrial design and other roles come into play. Companies that extend their audio identity to products, services and promotions have more ways to grow brand value.^{iv} The opportunity is there, and for most large companies (who already spend between \$1 million and \$20 million on sound) it’s ringing clear as a bell.

Building an audio identity

Most companies take one of two approaches to building an audio identity. The first is promotional audio branding, which aims to connect existing dots—to brand the sound, usually with a sonic logo or brand-identifier of some sort, everywhere a company communicates.

For example, if you’re advertising via traditional or experiential means, if you’re connecting with customers in events or retail spaces, or even if your company has a toll-free phone number, you’re already projecting an audio brand. Each touchpoint strengthens or weakens perceptions of your company.

Famous examples of promotional audio branding include NBC’s three-tone chimes, AOL’s “You’ve got mail,” or United Airlines’ adoption of George Gershwin’s “Rhapsody in Blue” as its corporate theme.

This is the outside layer of the onion and thus the easiest to peel. Though promotional audio branding only scratches the surface, it’s the least complicated to define and implementation is a

relative snap. Plus, it works in sneaky ways that visuals can't – people don't need to pay attention to notice it.

The second approach is actionable audio branding, which makes the most of psychoacoustics—linking sound to the brain—to affect our emotions and change our behaviors. Well-designed, behavior-based audio branding is a critical part of the experience that we have with everyday products and environments—from computers to cell phones, from ATMs to busy public spaces. If not carefully orchestrated, then unfettered sound becomes irrelevant clutter in the mind of consumers.

Muzak's service, designed to increase customer spending in retail spaces, is more an act of experience design than simply spinning records. They're influencing behaviors. Same with the London Underground train's "Mind the gap" voice alert—first and foremost it's a safety warning, but it's also a regional catchphrase and a popular retail franchise.

Designers for the Ford Mustang sought to create a visceral high when they recently redesigned the legendary car. The new Mustang's front grill was tailored to emulate Steve McQueen's cool-as-ice stare in the film *Bullitt* (in which McQueen drove a '68 Mustang). Nearly 40 years later, Ford digitized the *Bullitt* soundtrack and tuned the Mustang's exhaust system to precisely match that of the sound of McQueen's machine as heard in the film.

Technology brands have a vast opportunity to build their brand through the use of sound. Unfortunately, most fall flat. Windows Vista, for instance, features a thoughtful set of interface sounds, but none of them are linked to the brand or other Microsoft products. To their credit, however, it has avoided a mistake that many electronics companies don't: the system isn't overloaded with careless or intrusive bleeps and blips. (Rule number one: brilliant sound design can never compensate for an otherwise poor user experience.)

Although actionable audio branding is more challenging than promotional branding, the rewards can be substantial, as it can cover nearly all aspects of a customer's experience with a company. If your goal is to improve brand perceptions where the rubber hits the road, then the returns are real and the work is measurable.

Transformative audio branding

There's another way to use audio as an influential extension of the brand, and it doesn't involve the use of audio assets or sonic compositions to reinforce the brand. Transformative audio branding is a matter of reframing the entire business, using the lens of sound to drive innovation and seed new products that can result in new revenue streams and even new markets.

Take the well-known case of Apple—a once-confused (think 1996) computer-commodity company, which has become a household name, a category maker, a market leader and an iconic brand, thanks to the success of its iPod and iTunes music store. This success would have been hard to imagine 10 years ago, but Apple's ability to properly harness our passion for music has transformed its business into one that all its competitors hope to emulate.

Starbucks is another one: where's the role for music in a company that we once thought of as just a coffee business? Starbucks' carefully crafted Hear Music brand (now playing at a Starbucks, iTunes

store or XM satellite receiver near you) has changed our view of the company. Starbucks has morphed from a coffee brand to a trusted source of creative influence. Their success with Hear Music has fueled their expansion into books and movies. That's a long way from providing a simple cup of joe.

Good sound is good business

There is no "Come to audio" moment. Neither Steve Jobs nor Howard Schultz woke up one day and simply decided to change their businesses based on a newfound passion for sound. Innovation is never that simple. But both companies have shown that at least one clear path to people's hearts, minds and wallets is through their earbuds. Whatever comes next for tomorrow's category-makers may very well follow suit. (Did someone say iPhone?)

Not all big companies are interested in, or capable of, innovating on a world-class scale. But many do, at the very least, want to be closer to the cutting edge than their competitors. And just about all companies, brand groups and product groups are keen on the idea of better leveraging their current investments. In this case they're already spending millions on their sonic communications, and a strategic approach to audio can provide the economic value that's otherwise missing.

List of references:

ⁱNorth, Hargreaves and McKendrick, "Music and on-hold waiting time," *The British Journal of Psychology* 90, Fall 1999; North and Hargreaves, "The effects of musical complexity and silence on waiting time," *Environment and Behavior* 31, January 1999.

ⁱⁱAudio Branding Research Wave 1. SonicBrand UK, 2005.

ⁱⁱⁱ*Nation's Restaurant News*, April 11, 2005

^{iv}*Brand Sense* study, Martin Lindstrom, 2005

Kilde: AIGA, Noel Franus