5 Music Brands

Introduction

Fender Stratocasters, Steinway grand pianos, Marshall amplifiers, the iPod – these are all brands associated with the music business in one way or another. However, in addition to these product brands, there is regular talk within the music industry of pop idols, rock icons, pop stars, jazz greats, rock gods, legendary opera singers, cult bands, guitar heroes, stellar performances, trademark sounds, signature tunes, classic albums, breakthrough singles, rock 'n' roll myths, anthemic songs, breakout/breakthrough recordings, and – of course – hype. These terms have in common the signification of some kind of, or some claim to, cultural distinction. From a marketing point of view, this kind of talk fits very easily into the strategic notion of positioning, as well as the discourse of branding.

Branding is a discourse which (primarily) marketing practitioners and scholars have developed to talk about the symbolic or cultural aspects of business. Commentators in other disciplines have also contributed to the discussion about branding (Lury, 2004; Arvidsson, 2005). However, in this book, the initial focus is on the marketing perspective, with the discussion broadening out in Chapter 6 to take in a perspective which is closer to cultural studies. There are several reasons for an extended treatment of branding in this book.

First, a discussion of branding is important in the context of the book's intended purpose, because branding is closely associated with the strategic marketing notion of 'positioning' (see Chapter 1). Positioning is about winning the battle for the consumer's mind (Ries and Trout, 1981), i.e. developing a brand image that works for musicians, their managers

or agents, and their record labels, a practice on which a lot of time and money are spent in the music business.

Second, branding terminology is regularly used, particularly within the more commercially oriented areas of music, and it is important to gain a clear understanding of what is intended by such use. Scholarly research around brands and branding has developed an extensive range of terms, and an understanding of these and their referential scope can help non-marketing scholars and practitioners to understand where branding proponents obtain their ideas, and what purpose these ideas serve.

However, this chapter reflects also on a number of challenges which complicate the application of branding to music. These include issues around important characteristics of music itself (aural, social, cultural), the number of different stakeholders involved in musical projects, the complexity and continually changing nature of music production, marketing and consumption practices, and problems with brand discourse (including its commercial tone, its multi-strandedness, the indiscriminate application of the term 'brand' to everything, and branding proponents' lack of linguistic reflexivity – the fact that those who speak about 'branding' are not always clear on what they mean).

Cultural branding

The notion of 'cultural brands' is gaining currency in marketing. However, the phrase is at risk of appearing tautological, because all brands or signs are cultural by definition. Nevertheless, the idea of cultural branding has taken root, and it is worthwhile to set down a number of specific ways in which one may construe it. In his book on cultural branding, Holt (2004) develops the idea of 'how brands become icons'. He uses a number of case studies to argue that certain products acquire an identity value which makes them iconic (Apple, Coke, Harley, Bud). According to Holt's line of thinking, iconic brands address acute contradictions in society and perform identity myths that address these desires and anxieties. These identity myths reside in the brand, which consumers experience and share via ritual action, and are set in populist worlds. The brands serve as activists, leading culture by relying on

breakthrough performances rather than consistent communications, and enjoy a cultural halo effect. Setting aside the commercial associations of the above brands, within the area of music several iconic artists can be identified who fit the profile that Holt has outlined to different degrees and in different contexts; for example, Bob Dylan, Green Day, or Edith Piaf.

More generally, one may take cultural branding as:

1   the idea that in order to understand branding one needs to understand brands as cultural signs;

2   the idea that corporations 'brand' (shape, form, mark) people through the creation of organizational 'cultures' and so on;

3   the idea that corporations create cultural artefacts when they make products (iPod), or promotional cultures when they carry out marketing communications campaigns;

4   the practices of appropriating, co-opting or commodifying culture by means of capitalistic interventions such as music sponsorship (e.g. Tommy Hilfiger and the Rolling Stones, or Blackberry and U2), celebrity endorsement (Madonna and GAP), or product placement (e.g. rappers' lyrics); and

5   the practices whereby arts/heritage organizations use cultural strategies to promote their offerings.

Art brands and music brands

Within marketing, there is a sub-field known as arts marketing (O'Reilly and Kerrigan, 2010; O'Reilly, 2012; O'Reilly *et al.* (forthcoming)). This strand of work has to do with the application of marketing theory to the arts, but also – far more broadly – with the relationship between the arts and commerce. There is still relatively little work on arts branding, a couple of exceptions being Schroeder (2006), who discusses branding in the context of the production and consumption of artistic images and offers an artist case study to explore the relationship between branding, consumption and art, and O'Reilly