6 Socio-Cultural Music Branding

Introduction

All of the issues in the preceding chapter come under the heading of meaning. Although there is some acknowledgement within the marketing discipline of the notion of brand meanings, relatively little attention has been paid to an underlying theory of cultural meaning. In order to deal with this, it is helpful to turn to cultural studies and a socio-cultural approach to branding. In this chapter, a framework is proposed for how music brands are created.

Branding discourse is not good at understanding the meaning of arts and entertainment offerings. Because branding terminology has been largely developed by business academics, practitioners and intermediaries, it is a very blunt instrument in the cultural arena. By framing something or someone as a brand, the speaker invokes a particular way of speaking, a discursive repertoire, or a lens, which focuses on certain features of a phenomenon and pushes others out of focus. In fact, a serious failure of mainstream branding theory as applied by commercial marketers is its failure, relatively speaking, to handle the cultural dimensions of arts brands. It is unhelpful to apply commercial branding terminology to arts and entertainment brands without carefully considering the cultural context, the social interaction between all of the stakeholders, what meanings are generated and understood around the specific musical project or scene, what art-generic conventions apply, and what ideologies and values inform production and consumption practices in the project in question.

The purpose of this attempt is to get beyond the instrumental and unreflexive use of 'brandthink' and to ask the following questions: In whose interest is branding discourse or terminology being mobilized? On what terms is the branding discussion being held? What are the implications of branding discourse for ways of thinking and talking about music? While those on the more commercial side of music (e.g. marketers) may be comfortable talking about music brands, others (e.g. songwriters, musicians, composers) may feel a strong resistance to their work being treated as a 'brand', for example on grounds of artistic integrity or psychological congruence. No doubt this resistance can partly be traced to the long-running tensions between commerce and art which have been so frequently written about. By working out an analytical framework which enables both cultural and commercial meaning to be considered, it is hoped that these tensions can be seen and judged in a clearer light.

Branding is the principal cultural practice of the marketing imagination. Branding puts the 'mark' into 'mark-eting'. Arguably, branding discourse represents marketing's attempt to co-opt language and signification for capital, and is a key discursive resource in marketing ideology (O'Reilly, 2005). Commercial success relies significantly on consumers' extractions of cultural meanings from musical offerings, and those meanings of music are shaped and constrained by the conditions – including economic, commercial and political conditions – of its production and consumption. Understanding the cultural dimensions of music marketing practices can provide music marketers and brand managers with a better understanding of what they are marketing to whom. Branding is fundamentally about signification, i.e. meaning, and a discussion of branding can bring the cultural and commercial dimensions of music marketing into a common focus.

To talk of anything as 'a music brand' is a discursive move rather than an ontological statement. Branding is simply one of many lenses through which one may regard the phenomenon of music. Because of the symbolic nature of music as cultural text, it is particularly necessary to accommodate this cultural dimension into any theory of music marketing. Music is a vehicle for cultural meaning.

Cultural view of branding

Branding may also be seen as the cultural strand in marketing thought. The AMA's definition of 'brand' is a 'name, term, sign, symbol or design, or a combination of them, intended to identify the goods and services of one seller or group of sellers and to differentiate them from those of competition' (2007). This is a rather limited definition. The important point here is that, in characterizing a brand as a 'sign', the AMA is signalling that a brand is a cultural artefact, object, or entity.

Historically, the right to brand in a physical sense was derived from political or religious authority, or from social or commercial power. The practice of branding has been applied, for example, by governments to individuals to signify a change in their status as criminals or outlaws. Contemporary use of branding in a commercial context tends to ascribe the power to brand to corporations, as providers of commercial offerings. However, in its wider sense as a signifying practice, branding or marking is by no means restricted to enterprises. From a culturalist point of view, everyone is a sign-maker. The commercial practice of branding is simply a special case of a wider human signifying practice. Using the word 'sign' to define a brand moves the discussion into the domain of semiotics, or semiology (the study of signs or meaning). In that sense, branding, when considered as a sign-making practice, can be seen as only one example of human beings' many sign-making practices. In a narrow sense, branding, as commercially understood, is restricted to the practice whereby capitalist organizations invest heavily in coordinating their communications processes and outputs for profit. Although some marketing and branding commentators seem to believe that branding *is* the culture, there are strong grounds for inverting this assertion, and arguing instead that commerce, including commercial branding, is simply one part of the totality of human culture.

The symbolic dimension of brands is antecedent to their construction as, for instance, a sign of ownership. A brand may be read as the sum total of the meanings of a branded entity, be it a product, organization or artist. Brand meanings are constructed not just by managers, but also by artists, consumers, intermediaries and other stakeholders. Signification