Key Issues

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in the Arts and Entertainment Industry

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4 Branding the Arts and Entertainment

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Introduction

Given the extraordinary changes in the global business environment within the past ten years, the pressures on arts and entertainment organisations to adapt are enormous. For example, as we saw in Chapter 2, the digital revolution has brought radical changes to many businesses in the creative and cultural industries, creating significant opportunities and threats for producers. The issues raised by this turbulent environment include intellectual property protection, user-led innovation, new routes to market for producers, celebrity culture, the power of online audience or fan communities, as well as multi-channel and multi-platform marketing – and the growth in the use of branding discourse within the arts and entertainment sector.

This chapter explores the idea of arts and entertainment brands and branding in the context of the sector's turbulent operating environment. Within this context, it continues to investigate the changing relationships between arts and entertainment consumers and producers. To talk of branding in relation to the arts (though less so entertainment) runs the risk of being accused of applying neo-liberal ideology to the sacred, and of daubing the altar of culture with the filthy marks of lucre. However, branding discourse has already penetrated the world of arts and entertainment. Arguably, a better line of resistance is to point to the culturalist idea of brands as signs. When speaking of culture in relation to the arts and entertainment, we are therefore on home territory and able to mobilise a range of constructs and arguments which help to frame a critical view of branding in this area. This chapter attempts this very line of resistance.

The tide of 'brandspeak'

The word 'brand' is now commonplace in popular, journalistic, business, entertainment, everyday and even political parlance, and it is increasingly being applied to the arts and entertainment industry. Branding is said by its proponents to be important for artists, entertainers, provider organisations, media, intermediaries and agents, not forgetting consumers. Brand consultants argue that having a 'strong brand' is necessary if an arts or entertainment organisation wishes to attract and retain the best talent and the best audiences.

But in so far as 'brand-speak' frames its referents as brands, it brings with it connotations of commerciality which may not always be welcome in an arts or entertainment context. Is it appropriate, for example, to use branding terminology to talk about artistic and creative offerings? Is it right to talk of Shakespeare as 'the UK's leading drama brand'? There is an inherent tension in using branding concepts to talk about the more artistic end of the arts and entertainment spectrum in particular. While those on the more commercial side of arts and entertainment (e.g. marketers) may be comfortable talking about art brands and entertainment brands, others (e.g. writers, directors, musicians and choreographers) may, on grounds of artistic integrity or psychological congruence, feel a strong resistance to their work being treated as a 'brand'.

This resistance can no doubt partly be traced back to the long-running tensions between commerce and art which have been so frequently written about. For the sake of argument, I take the King Canute view, namely that there is little point in trying to stop the tide of brandspeak. Instead, by querying the 'nature' of brands from a culturalist point of view, I argue for a much more complex analysis of 'brand' meanings than mainstream branding discourse provides, and offer a series of analytical frameworks which seek to take full account of the production, circulation and consumption of arts and entertainment meanings (or brands).

What is a brand? The mainstream view

From the mainstream commercial perspective, a brand is a range of things, including: a mark of ownership; a differentiating device; something which communicates capability; a symbolic device which enables consumers to express something about themselves; a means by which companies reduce the risk of purchase for consumers; and a kind of symbolic asset. From a strategic marketing point of view, branding is the practice of positioning the offering (functionally, competitively, and culturally), and brand identities are built

Chapter extract

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