

PLAYING THEIR TUNE

Retailers use music to turn up the volume on customer engagement

by FIONA SOLTES

Picture yourself in your favorite store. As you peruse the racks and shelves, your head is moving with the music; you're feeling connected. Understood. Represented. Perhaps even inspired.



To what degree has the music helped that happen?

Retailers have long known that store music affects shopper behavior — tempo, volume and genre play a part in creating a mood and even closing a sale. As generations, behaviors and expectations change, however, there's an increasing consideration of music as content — a proactive part of branding — rather than just an attempt to play what the target demographic wants to hear.

The timing is right; recent studies have shown that the trendsetting Millennial generation tends to listen to more music than other age groups. They also are less likely to see music used in commercial ventures as “selling out”; 93 percent of Millennial survey respondents said they like brands that sponsor live music events, according to one study

from live promoter AEG and marketing agency Momentum Worldwide.

Sejal Solanki, director of digital experience for clothing retailer Charlotte Russe — which added music to its app this year with the help of Feed.fm — says it's all about relevance.

“It is important to be relevant to your customer and create an engaging experience for them,” she says. “We love working with innovative companies to bring new experiences to our customers, but understand that it has to connect with them.”

CREATING SONIC IDENTITIES

New York-based Man Made Music opened the doors of a state-of-the-art new studio in 2015. The space, on an upper-level floor of a century-old Financial District building and

flooded with natural light, includes rooms big enough to hold 20 string players or entire brass sections for recording. There are numerous rooms for mixing and editing, as well as smaller areas for core teams of songwriters and arrangers, all working together to create sonic identities across numerous businesses and disciplines.

Man Made Music works in retail as part of its overall client portfolio, which spans technology, fast food, beauty, sports, broadcast media, entertainment and other areas. AT&T is a longtime client; the company's ever-evolving sonic identity encompasses its familiar four-note sonic logo, brand navigation sounds, conferences and live events, ads and overhead music in the company's bricks-and-mortar locations. In AT&T's flagship stores, there are even "immersive environments with sound" that shoppers experience as soon as they walk in.

Kevin Perlmutter, chief of innovation for Man Made Music, says his company begins its work with clients by ensuring that the tone and vibe of an environment is "coming off in the right way, in the best way possible."

"Sound plays a huge role in that," he says. "Sound impacts people instinctively, viscerally, emotionally, at a subconscious level. So when brands are using sounds in an environment that are not strategic — we call that 'sonic trash' — when they're using music that doesn't fit the desired brand experience, these are things that cause the experience to break down. They cause people to instinctively — and eventually, consciously — not want to be a part of it."

Conversely, when sound is "thought-through and designed to fit the desired brand experience, it has the ability to convey what you want people to know about an experience," he says.

"It has the ability to set the right emotional tone. It has the ability to increase linger times, to inspire sales of a certain type of product. Sound has some neurological benefits and impact that can lead directly to whether sales are going up or down."

Emotion, after all, is a driver of loyalty — and sound is a driver of emotion.

Dan Venne, Man Made Music's group creative director and lead producer, says the focus on strategy sets the company apart. Clients take part in "sonic mood board" sessions with clips of popular music, underscoring from films or tunes from Man Made Music's library, all with the goal of creating references and language as a starting point for the writers.

The company employs numerous live musicians; rather than one person in one room with a

computer, "it ends up being a deeply collaborative process," Venne says.

Sound is one of the core identity pillars of a brand, Perlmutter says.

"People are readily investing in having a well-defined and recognizable and guided visual identity," he says. "They're not just pulling a brand logo off a stock shelf or letting retail employees change it if they don't like the way it looks in the window. We feel that sound has the same or more impact on the customer experience, in conveying what the brand stands for. It's an imperative to not let sound happen haphazardly."

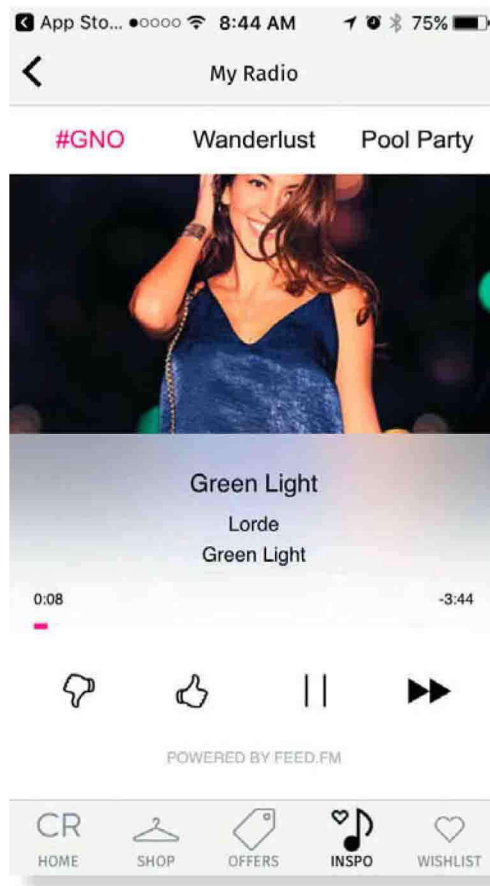
CHANGING THE DYNAMIC

At Charlotte Russe, incorporation of music into mobile shopping has been as much about seeing as hearing. The retailer re-launched its app in July 2016 with shoppable Instagram, flash sales and real-time inventory; with the addition of music this spring, the average time spent there has significantly increased.

"Before this partnership, we did not have hard data on the types of music our customer was into," Solanki says. "The only data we had on the music we played in-store was based on associate feedback, and it was anecdotal. We were excited to partner with Feed.fm to help us explore new music and offer up songs that wouldn't normally be on the rotation. From there, we were able to learn from the data to see what she liked and didn't like."

Besides, she says, having music in the app softens the experience.

"When I go to other apps, it feels very transactional," she says. "It just feels like a mobile web shopping experience. For Charlotte, we're focused on changing that dynamic a little bit. Sure, there's the commerce piece of it that's important, but how do we continue to look for things that will infuse more of that brand engagement and loyalty with our customer?"



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Feed.fm, with services that include music licensing in addition to mobile web and in-app technology, has found that three key factors tell the story: engagement, retention and revenues.

Engagement is measured in a couple of ways, says Jeff Yasuda, Feed.fm CEO — both average session time and the number of sessions per day. As for retention, that's how frequently people come back after the initial experience. Revenues speak for themselves.

Feed.fm clients such as American Eagle, Charlotte Russe and Toys “R” Us have run A/B tests with music and without in their apps and mobile offerings, “and they have found without question that when people listen to music in the product, they stay on longer, they come back more and they buy more stuff,” Yasuda says.

“When we started, people said, ‘Ah! This strikes me as a nice-to-have, but do I really need music on my app or website?’ But after we show them the data, we become infrastructure. These are annual contracts.”

Feed.fm starts with a “curated experience,” developed by its in-house team of music aficionados. It then moves toward personalization by allowing users to give a thumbs-up or thumbs-down for each song played, with those in the negative category not played again. For Charlotte Russe, songs are presented in several categories such as “GNO” (Girls Night Out), “Wanderlust” (inspired by summer festivals) and “Pool Party” (with dance, R&B and throwback jams).

“Some clients have a very strong point of view on music and some do not,” Yasuda says. “They’ll say, ‘You guys are the experts. This is our target

demographic. Can you give us some ideas?’ That’s where we leverage their audience insights — demographics and psychographics — to come up with a curation strategy. We then put it into action and let the user data guide us on optimization. We can tell right away what people are loving and what music they are indifferent to.”

Without Feed.fm, Solanki says, Charlotte Russe could never have pulled it off: Licensing, agreements and other legal issues would have made the process too complex. But Feed.fm made it “easy and seamless,” she says.

Understanding how all this data works could eventually parlay into the bricks-and-mortar environment, Yasuda says — and have a much greater impact than a store manager or associate at the register simply playing what they like.

HONEST AUTHENTICITY

For any retailer interested in upping its music game, there is a central question that must be addressed: Should the tunes played already be familiar to the shopper, or should they be unique?

MoodMixes falls decidedly among the latter. The company provides music in a variety of genres — and handles rights and permissions — for retail, restaurant and other spaces. All of it comes directly from independent musicians, much from self-released albums; 50 percent of revenues are paid directly to the musicians themselves, says John Buckman, founder and CEO.

“You can feel the honesty in the music,” Buckman says. “It’s not canned or formulaic. And because it’s not what you hear on the radio, it’s often more memorable.”

MoodMixes is owned and operated by Magnatune, a company Buckman started in 2003 to help grow the non-major-label music culture; that company now provides nearly 22,000 songs from 715 artists to the MoodMixes catalog.

“There seemed to be only two kinds of customers for music-for-retail when we started,” Buckman says. “Those that just wanted a cheap way to have any music, and those that had an unlimited budget to create a terrific brand experience and typically go to a sound consultancy. We wanted to be in the middle, with strong music to support the retailer’s goals, but at a reasonable, non-consultant price.”

Clearly, there are numerous strategies for building loyalty and engagement through music. Turning a deaf ear is no longer an option. **STORES**

Fiona Soltes, a freelancer based near Nashville, Tenn., loves a good bargain almost as much as she loves a good story.