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# Now Hear This

## In-store audio blazes beyond the blue light special

One of the most powerful tools in the retailer's toolbox is impossible to see. In-store audio, one of the oldest forms of at-retail marketing, has evolved with the times. Once the domain of canned music and intrusive "Sale on aisle four!" messages, store audio today is a part of the customer experience that must be shaped and sculpted like any other.

In a 2004 Arbitron survey of 1,000 retail shoppers, 41 percent of respondents said they had made purchases they had not planned on making after hearing an audio ad or promotional message, and 36 percent switched brands from what they originally intended to buy in response to an audio message.

**Few things can polarize an audience more quickly and decisively than music, so careful consideration needs to go into selection.**

"Audio is almost always a positive part of the experience," said Jay Weinberg, president of loyalty marketing consultancy The JAY Group, whose clients include Bath & Body Works, LensCrafters and Yankee Candle. "Audio does play a role in the shopping experience, and influences purchasing behavior — interestingly, in women more than in men."

### PLANNING THE AUDIO EXPERIENCE

The first steps in building an audio plan are virtually identical to those involved in the early stages of planning other in-store media, such as digital signage. Chief among them is answering the key question, "Why?"

"Retailers should consider what their objective is for their sound," said Leanne Flask, vice president of music design for

audio provider DMX. "They should think about why they are using music. Is it for the extension of a brand? Is it to create a certain mood in their environment? Are they wanting to use audio to dampen external noises such as shoes walking on a concrete floor?"

Retailers wanting to build ambiance or create a memorable and enjoyable atmosphere often turn to music, and rightfully so. But few things can polarize an audience more quickly and decisively than music, so careful consideration needs to go into selection.

"Music must match the environment," said Hal Stiles, general manager of in-store audio provider Private Label Radio. "You want to set a specific mood. If you are

trying to create a relaxing ambiance, you want to use more familiar music."

Stiles notes that music evokes an emotional response from customers on a subconscious level. This creates an instant connection between store and shopper, one that can either be positive or negative.

Furthermore, multilocation retailers need to treat audio just like any other bit of marketing collateral.

And just as a chain never would dream of having wildly different carpet and paint colors from store to store, so should audio selections and schemes be consistent chain-wide. "Why should one location be playing heavy metal and the next be playing jazz?" Stiles asked.

Interestingly, the style and genre of music chosen can be used in a proactively negative fashion. Weinberg points to retailers such as Hot Topic and Abercrombie &

Fitch, which he says cater to an adolescent market and use audio to "ward off" all but their desired shoppers.

Beyond music, marketing and promotional messages often are thrown into the mix, and here retailers must be especially careful.

"Often when people think of in-store messaging, they think of blue light specials, cheaply produced and irritating announcements that people ignore or tolerate with some level of disdain," said Brian McKinley, vice president of marketing for DMX. "But these ads can be effective when produced intelligently and at a high level of quality."

Just as retailers need to beware of using television spots for content on their in-store digital signs, so radio ads are inappropriate for in-store audio. Stiles said customers are conditioned to tune out radio advertising when they hear a new voice chime in.

"However, independent studies have proven the efficacy and recall of shorter messages," he said. "These can be from seven to 20 seconds and should not use more than one voice per ad or two voices per program."

Voice messages can be coupled intelligently with the store's music program to extend the brand and create the perception that the retailer also is a broadcaster.

"Phrases like 'Thanks for listening to Subway Radio' reinforce brand image and often are overlooked," Stiles said.

### CHOOSING VOLUME, DEFINING ZONES

Few things are more unsettling than shopping in a retail store where the audio, be it music or messaging or some hybrid of the two, is played at an inappropriate volume.

The best of intentions — or a simple lack of research — can send customers scrambling to the exit.

"1970s disco played at a whisper doesn't work," said Stiles. "Neither does blaring 'The Girl from Ipanema.'"



Leroy Henry, vice president of creative services for audio provider PlayNetwork, said background music should be set to play at the same level as the ambient noise within the space, with foreground music set to about 3-6 decibels higher. "Levels 10 decibels above ambient would be perceived as being twice as loud as the store's noise floor," he said. "Depending on the store environment, we have clients that have levels set anywhere from 70 to 85 decibels." He also noted that there are OSHA restrictions in place on retail audio levels.

Another key element to be decided in the planning process is the layout of audio zones, or how different channels of sound will be delivered to different parts of the facility. This is equal parts strategic and aesthetic, part science and art. Ambient sound makes more sense in parts of the store where you want customers to linger, while more aggressive promotional messages make sense near the point of purchase.

Zoning isn't limited to the sales floor. Stiles said Private Label Radio serves up audio in some McDonald's restaurants, and has a separate audio zone designed for the food prep area. Regional managers can use this zone for employee communication, if they so desire.

Retailers also will need to consider audio playlists and dayparting. Audio can be scheduled to run based on time of day, day of week and a handful of other triggering conditions.

Most audio providers offer advanced tools to reduce perceived repetition, and these tools usually work hand-in-hand with playlists and daypart planning. Henry said PlayNetwork offers a feature called "Rich Mixing," which allows audio assets to be tagged by weight, in much the same way radio stations build their playlists; that

is, "heavies" pass through the rotation more quickly than "mediums" and "lights." Randomization can be added into the mix, for instance, so that each time a "medium" is due to be played, the software pulls a selection at random from the pool of those cuts that have not been played in a certain period of time. ■

— James Bickers

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### Audio Advice

Designing an in-store audio experience requires careful planning and an understanding of who your customers are and how they want to shop. Jay Weinberg, president of The JAY Group, offers four best practices for planning in-store audio.

- 1 Choose music and/or audio appropriate for the shoppers you want to attract.
- 2 Focus slightly more on women when deciding on the audio content.
- 3 Choose a personalized music service or system, not broadcast radio.
- 4 Supplement the cost of audio and increase sales by including appropriate audio advertising messages.