

Addressing today's top brand challenges with sonic identity

Received (in revised form): 23rd June, 2016



Kevin Perlmutter

KEVIN PERLMUTTER

is Senior Vice President, Chief Strategist at Man Made Music — a strategic music and sound studio that scores brand and entertainment experiences. He leads the expansion of services that enable clients to strengthen emotional connections with their desired audiences across the brand experience. This includes the creation of SonicPulse® Research, a proprietary methodology specifically designed to assess the impact and effectiveness of music and sound. He draws from his experience as Senior Director of Brand Strategy at Interbrand, where he guided clients across the full spectrum of brand-strengthening disciplines from brand identity and portfolio architecture, to customer experience and employee engagement.



Nora Bradshaw

NORA BRADSHAW

is Brand Strategist and analytics expert, focused on audience insights, creating and activating brand strategy. Nora served as Senior Strategist, Experience and Innovation at Man Made Music, leveraging research and strategy to build Sonic Identities. Previously she was a Brand Strategy and Analytics Consultant at Interbrand.

Abstract

The bar for brand experience has never been higher. Today, marketing and customer experience leaders are in pursuit of the best ways to connect with their desired audiences across an ever-increasing number of touch points. They are looking for distinctiveness, relevance, consistency and, most of all, effectiveness. While so much has changed, many are overlooking a powerful opportunity; and now is the time to consider new approaches to acquisition and loyalty. This paper examines the power of sonic identity — the strategic use of music and sound for brand experiences and audience connection. Not as a tactic, but as an essential aspect of a brand identity that can be scaled appropriately across communications, digital and live touch points. Music and sound can instantaneously trigger an emotional response, increase awareness and attribution, improve perceptions, drive consideration and build deeper connections. This paper discusses what makes sonic identity so powerful and how it can address today's top brand challenges.

Keywords

brand experience, identity, sonic, design, user experience, emotion, loyalty

INTRODUCTION

It is no surprise that the marketing landscape has changed — we have moved from a communication-focused world to an experience-focused world. In this world, it is no longer sufficient to tell people what to think about your brand in 30-second ads, in magazines or on billboards and expect to connect emotionally with them. Today, people are most loyal when they have great experiences

with the brand, often in digital and live environments. This has created more complexity for marketers who are now attempting to orchestrate consistent, yet relevant, brand experiences across a dizzying array of touch points. Plus, there is a lot of performance pressure on the overall effectiveness of efforts. Meanwhile, target audiences are bombarded with more brand impressions than ever before. With so much that has dramatically changed

Kevin Perlmutter,

E-mail: Kevin@manmademusic.com

for how audiences engage with brands, it is time for marketers to consider new approaches in the face of new challenges.

This paper is about the strategic use of music and sound, also known as sonic identity, providing detail on why it is more important now than it has been in the past, what makes it so powerful and how it can be used to improve critical business and brand performance metrics.

INCREASING COMPLEXITIES FOR BRANDS

At the 2015 Masters of Marketing conference, Association of National Advertisers (ANA) Chairman Bob Liodice¹ summed up the challenge for marketers by saying that ‘it’s never been easier to reach consumers, and it’s never been harder to connect with them’. He went on to say, ‘...marketers are no longer getting the expected results from their advertising and promotion. Old-fashioned brand-building is becoming a relic of a bygone era. . .The ability to deliver on growth will depend on how well marketers can master marketing operations and shape the customer journey experience.’ Therefore, marketers must determine the most effective and efficient ways to get results that extend from communications to customer experience.

To build on this further, customer experience proficiency has increasingly become an important focus area. There is a lot of research on this topic, much of it out of Temkin Group,² that points to the fact that customer experience improvement remains a critical focus area for many companies, with over two-thirds of large companies expected to increase their spending on customer experience year over year. This is because customer experience improvement correlates to stronger revenue performance — people buy more and recommend more.

Interestingly, emotion is a primary component of customer experience success. So much so that Temkin Group³ has declared 2016 ‘The Year of Emotion’. According to Customer Experience Transformist Bruce Temkin, ‘Our research shows that emotion is the component of customer experience that has the largest impact on loyalty, but it is also the area where companies are least adept and often seemingly ignore. . .In 2016, we expect to see a major jump in the number of companies that discuss, measure, and design for emotion.’

MUSIC AND SOUND = EMOTION

Simply stated by Leo Tolstoy, ‘Music is the shorthand of emotion.’⁴ We don’t need one of the greatest writers of all time to tell us what we already know in our gut. We know that music has the power to change our mood on demand, to dig up a long forgotten memory, to bring us back to a place and time and to propel us forward. Everyone has their own unique music taste, but one thing is the same for all: we react to music and sound, often instantaneously.

While there are many drivers of emotion in an experience — the quality of the product, the kindness of company representative, the ease of making a transaction or the overall aesthetic quality of the branded environment — the strategic use of music and sound is one way to increase the odds of a better experience.

When brands tap into the power of music and sound, experiences will be better and emotional connections will be stronger. It is a way to make audiences feel something positive that compels them to want to enjoy your brand over and over again. Sound is also a great way to tie together brand experiences across communications, live and digital touch points so that they are connected and relevant.

Importantly, sound can be used when visual branding cannot, to build awareness through attribution and guide the journey of the experience. On the flip side, sonic trash — poor sound experiences or inappropriate music — can ruin the brand experiences and turn away your desired audience. Sonic identity is an opportunity to do a better job at consistently setting the right tone for your brand, and appealing to peoples' emotions to evoke desired feelings, behaviours and loyalty.

THE SCIENCE OF MUSIC AND SOUND

Before sharing details on how to improve brand experiences with a sonic identity, it is important to first share some scientific details on what makes the strategic use of music and sound so powerful.

Understanding how the brain interprets information becomes more important as we consider how technology is changing the world and people. In Kit Yarrow's *Decoding the New Consumer Mind*,⁵ she describes how 'our brains have adapted to a new digital world, and we're neurologically different as a result'. This is fundamentally causing people to think faster, multi-task better, have less tolerance for ambiguity, less patience and shorter attention spans. The lesson for brand leaders and creators is that, 'consumers increasingly rely on faster, more symbolic forms of communication'. For example, think about the reaction that you have to the swoosh sound of sent mail on an iPhone. Instantly, the sound communicates that the email was sent, and you feel a sense of completion and satisfaction.

Brain activity is described further in Daniel Kahneman's book *Thinking, Fast and Slow*,⁶ where he describes the two systems that drive the way people think and make decisions. We are ruled by System 1 — fast, intuitive and emotional. It operates

impulsively, with little or no effort. As much as 95 per cent of decision-making happens in the subconscious System 1. System 2, on the other hand, is slower, more deliberate and more logical. This part of the brain is called into action far less often to rationally solve complex situations that require attention and concentration. Communication-focused marketing tactics often and ineffectively appeal to System 2, asking consumers to rationally consider if the narrative put forward by a brand is true. Worse, communication-focused marketing attempts to connect with System 1, but fails to do so in a meaningful way, depriving brands of an opportunity to build deep emotional connections with their audience. To emphasise the point, Kahneman, who was awarded a Nobel Prize for his work, quoted psychologist Jonathan Haidt, who said, 'The emotional tail wags the rational dog'.

There is even more scientific rationale for why sound and music are such powerful tools. It relates to the speed at which we internalise and react to sound. As outlined by Dr. Seth Horowitz in *The Universal Sense*,⁷ music is fast and incredibly effective. It can literally bypass the rational part of the brain, and can be understood instinctively. 'In less than fifty milliseconds — still six times faster than the blink of an eye — you've already identified the sound and where it's coming from. In the actual time it takes for you to blink, sonic input gets directed through your auditory cortex to other parts of your brain that control memories and emotions.'

THE POWER OF A SONIC IDENTITY

A sonic identity can help brands harness the power of music and sound to connect more effectively. Sonic identity is a brand's proprietary sonic voice that conveys the brand story, enhances emotional

connection and builds brand attribution. It seamlessly ties together touch points across communications, live and digital experiences. Like a visual identity that has brand-specific elements such as a visual brand logo, a colour palette, fonts, imagery styles and more, a sonic identity can have a variety of proprietary custom-created elements and guidelines to ensure an on-brand, consistent, yet flexible, presence. The sonic identity includes a combination of long-form and short-form music, from a brand anthem that sets the overall tone for a unique sonic system, to a sonic logo, which provides short-form brand attribution analogous to a visual logo. These elements are the bookends that can inform other brand-specific sounds such as those in a digital or mobile environment, to long-form, custom or curated music tracks that fit the brand and specific brand touch points like retail stores, call centres, brand videos or live events. Music and sound are powerful tools to help brands better engage with their audience everywhere. As brands move beyond advertising and become more experience-focused, sonic has become more important than ever to drive instant brand recognition, convey meaning and make experiences more interactive. It is fundamentally effective and efficient, and the marketing community is catching on.

According to Landor,⁸ their No. 3 trend forecast for 2016 is 'Audio Branding Will Make Waves . . . brands will look to take advantage of consumers' inherent ability to identify sound, using audio branding to cut through the clutter, and increase consumer awareness while subtly relaying brand and product attributes to the consumer.'

According to the Harvard Business Review,⁹ 'There's one powerful branding tool that has been generally overlooked or perhaps undervalued by most marketers:

sound. The strategic use of sound can play an important role in positively differentiating a product or service, enhancing recall, creating preference, building trust, and even increasing sales. . . . cognitive studies show that relevant sounds and musical cues can truly influence people in ways marketers want.' Stated another way, a sonic identity is uniquely able to solve new challenges that marketers are facing.

ADDRESSING BRAND CHALLENGES

We have already discussed how the marketing landscape has changed. Communication is no longer sufficient in a world where consumers demand experiential connections with brands. In this experience-focused world, marketers still need to find a way to move the needle on essential brand metrics like awareness, consideration, favourability and loyalty. Sonic identity, done well, can efficiently and effectively improve these brand metrics while also addressing the following five important challenges:

1. **Conveying brand purpose and values**

First, sonic is an effective method of conveying a brand's purpose and values. People gravitate towards brands that stand for something, ones that have a role and contribution in the world, that go beyond what they're selling and rally employees to exceed the expectations of customers. Music is not only emotive; it has the ability to communicate meaning in ways that can be quickly understood. When executed properly, a strategically designed piece of music can be an anthem and emotional engine to express a brand's purpose and values, the types of products it designs or the genre of entertainment it showcases. Music can set the tone, the pace and the energy behind what you stand for.

In terms of brand performance, we know from Temkin Group¹⁰ that companies that outpace their competitors in customer experience have 50 per cent more engaged employees than those with worse customer experience than their peers.

2. **Improving brand recall and sales**

Second, a thoughtful sonic strategy can set the tone and guardrails for on-brand music creation and curation. Treating your brand's sonic identity in the same way that you treat your visual identity can lead to a much more consistent and meaningful brand experience. Not only can it provide efficiency in the creation and selection of music and sound but it can also be effective in significantly improving instantaneous brand recognition and favourability.

In terms of brand performance, according to a Leicester University¹¹ study, 'Brands with music that fit their identity are 96% more likely to be recalled than those with non-fit music or no music at all, and respondents are 24% more likely to buy a product with music that they recall, like and understand.'

3. **Connecting disparate touch points**

Third, the strategic use of music and sound can score the brand experience seamlessly across all touch points. Today, brands are connecting with customers on many platforms. Consider a hotel, a pharmacy or financial institution, where a consumer can interact with a brand over the phone, through an app and in person — all within the span of a few hours. More and more, consumers expect those customer experiences to be intuitive, purposeful and cohesive. Sonic identity has the ability to consistently convey meaning and personality in both digital and live environments with well-designed Brand Navigation Sounds® and

experience-enhancing music. Over time, a sonic identity can reach levels of attribution that are similar to a visual identity, enabling presence where a brand was once invisible. It can help brands be meaningful even when there is no room for visual or verbal storytelling.

In terms of brand performance, many research studies have shown that the right music can decrease perceived wait time when someone is on hold waiting to speak with a customer service representative. Also that use of the right music can increase linger time and sales in a retail store, and that certain genres of music will increase purchases of certain types of products.

4. **Enhancing experiences and engagement**

Fourth, music can be a powerful tool to heighten and enhance a brand's live experiences to better connect emotionally. Brands of all kinds are looking to connect with their audiences in experiential ways. Even brands that began online are creating brick and mortar stores, using them as an opportunity to build loyalty by connection in-person with customers. When it comes to sponsorships, it is no longer sufficient for a brand to spend millions of dollars on a sports sponsorship, for example, with just a logo on the building to show for it. These brands are now looking for new ways to be seen and add value by improving the experiences they are a part of. Music often plays a role in these kinds of experiences, whether it's a stadium sponsorship, retail store or other immersive environments. By appropriately using music that is uniquely associated with the brand or — better still — weaving in elements of a recognised sonic identity, brands can increase attribution and heighten emotional engagement, as well as improve return on investment (ROI).

From a brand performance perspective, music can enhance the overall emotion within an experience; and according to Temkin Group,¹² ‘Compared with customers who have negative emotional experiences, those with positive emotional experiences are more than 6 times as likely to buy more, more than 12 times as likely to recommend the company, and more than 5 times as likely to forgive the company for a mistake.’

5. **Humanising Digital**

Fifth, sonic can humanise digital touch points, making them more intuitive and appealing to consumers. Digital has become the way many brands communicate with customers. For all of its usefulness and efficiency, digital has the challenge of being devoid of personality and ultimately leads to an undifferentiated and seemingly uncaring experience. The strategic use of Brand Navigation Sounds® can dramatically improve a digital interaction by placing a brand’s unique identity and personality front-and-centre to provide clear navigation with proprietary sounds that are simultaneously functional and emotional.

From a brand performance perspective, sound can make digital interactions not only more efficient but also more enjoyable. ‘Reaction time to sound is faster than all other senses — 22% faster than sight (146 versus 189 milliseconds). Sounds heighten the experience, evoke emotions and speed recognition.’¹³

EXAMPLES OF SUCCESSFUL SONIC IDENTITY

Client example: Creating emotional connections

At Man Made Music, we work with a non-profit health organisation and have created a sonic identity that conveys their

mission to inspire researchers and galvanise supporters while remaining sensitive to those who suffer from a degenerative illness. Through SonicPulse® Research — our proprietary research methodology designed specifically to evaluate the impact and effectiveness of sound and music on emotion, brand attributes and essential brand metrics — we learned that the sonic anthem was incredibly successful in expressing essential brand attributes and 77 per cent of respondents believed it was appropriate for the organisation. Further, 48 per cent of respondents had a more favourable opinion of the organisation and 55 per cent were more interested in the organisation. We also heard verbatim feedback such as, ‘I found the music to be exhilarating, upbeat and extremely optimistic. It gives the listener a feeling that this debilitating disease can be beaten,’ and ‘It sounds caring and compassionate. It’s optimistic but also respectful-sounding for people dealing with this disease.’ That is precisely the story we wanted to tell and the sentiment we were trying to evoke. Through moving score, we were able to reinforce the organisation’s promise and, more importantly, build an emotional connection with audiences.

Client example: Driving meaning and longevity

One of our longstanding Man Made Music clients is a global technology company. Over five years ago we created their now iconic sonic identity, and have been adding further dimension to it across audiences and touch points ever since. In 2015, we worked with them to evolve the identity. The challenge was to evolve the sonic identity in a way that conveyed the brand’s expansion into the global markets and the entertainment space, without losing any of the existing equity and recognition. In

other words, make it more relevant, but do not dramatically change it.

Our strategy was to bring the identity to life in a new context, rich with the energy of the entertainment industry, full of curiosity, excitement and innovation, and to broaden the sonic palette to have more of a multi-cultural appeal. The evolved identity proved powerful. SonicPulse® Research revealed that 43 per cent of respondents had a more positive impression of the brand as a result of exposure to the sonic anthem. Fifty-one per cent said they were more likely to consider the brand. From the perspective of one consumer, 'While listening, I thought that the song was probably for [our client]. It just reminded me of the music in their ads.' Beyond being unmistakably associated with the brand, research revealed that the music alone was able to clearly articulate the evolved brand positioning and attributes.

Client example: Setting the right context

Man Made Music recently had the opportunity to work with a new and exciting sports startup in a quickly growing market. The challenge for us was to use sonic to differentiate the brand from important competitors, while also conveying their unique brand proposition in a category full of similar music. The goal was to sound like sports, but not sound like most other sports brands, to appeal to our client's young, mostly male demographic. Our client wanted the music to evoke the rush of game play, rather than the point of view of a spectator. When consumers stated through open-ended responses in SonicPulse® Research that 'If the intent is to give the player a rush or thrill, this is what the music indicates to me. It's a rush, generating excitement,' and other similar statements, we knew we had hit the mark.

PRINCIPLES OF DEVELOPING A SONIC IDENTITY

Creating a sonic identity is an important step for brands that are serious about emotionally connecting with their audience. This is not a tactical exercise nor should a sonic identity be disposable. When done well, a sonic identity will have meaning and longevity. It will also be flexible, to guide how on-brand music and sound can be used across all audiences and touch points. Here are three things to consider when designing sound for your brand:

1. Be purposeful

Bringing sound into an experience starts with a plan. You must determine what you are trying to achieve, where will it be most useful and how should it sound to be brand-appropriate and culturally relevant. From experience audit to sonic strategy brief, there is a lot to consider so that the right sound and music shows up in the right way.

2. Deepen meaning and emotional connection

A well-crafted sonic identity is designed to convey information and help people feel more emotionally drawn to the experience. Like a good movie score, the sound tells half the story. It is the emotional thread that sets the scene, builds anticipation and punctuates important moments. By then selecting the most appropriate music style, instrumentation and tempo, you can simultaneously articulate the brand story and appeal to your desired audience. Without a strategic approach to the use of music and sound, a lot of the brand storytelling and emotion-driving opportunity is lost.

3. Take out sonic trash

The goal is not to flood the experience with sound. In fact, sound will have more impact when it is sparse.

You want just the right sounds and/or music to guide the experience, set the right mood and provide useful information. Just think about making people happy, only using music and sound that represent your brand voice, and take out the sonic trash.

CONCLUSION

A brand's identity is incomplete without incorporating the strategic use of sound and music. A sonic identity can go a long way to address many of today's top brand challenges. Ultimately it is not about creating individual tactical sounds, or picking individual tracks of music. It is about being strategic and developing the essential DNA that brings your brand voice to life through music and sound. This sets the foundation for creating the powerful emotional impact that transforms brand experiences. Another way to think about this is the way it was written in *The Sonic Boom* by Joel Beckerman, Founder, Composer and Producer at Man Made Music: 'Sound, I believe, is the next frontier in business, storytelling and movements. It's an untapped layer of opportunity... But sound hasn't been harnessed at scale — as a tool for human connection. The people who realize this will benefit tremendously.'¹⁴

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Brand Navigation Sounds® and SonicPulse® Research are registered Trademarks of Man Made Music, Inc.

References

- (1) BrandChannel (2015) 'Why brands must rethink marketing in this age of disruption', available at: <http://brandchannel.com/2015/10/16/ana-2015-masters-marketing-101615/> (accessed 6th May, 2016).
- (2) Temkin Group (2015) '15 Customer experience factoids from 2015 – Infographic', available at: <https://experiencematters.wordpress.com/2016/02/04/15-customer-experience-factoids-from-2015-infographic/> (accessed 6th May, 2016).
- (3) Temkin Group (2015) '11 Customer experience trends for 2016 – The year of emotion', available at: <https://experiencematters.wordpress.com/2015/12/15/11-customer-experience-trends-for-2016-the-year-of-emotion/> (accessed 6th May, 2016).
- (4) Goodreads (2016) 'Leo Tolstoy > Quotes > Quotable Quote', available at: <http://www.goodreads.com/quotes/65861-music-is-the-shorthand-of-emotion> (accessed 6th May, 2015).
- (5) Yarrow, Kit (2014) 'Decoding the new consumer mind: How and why we shop and buy', Jossey-Bass, pages 23–28.
- (6) Kahneman, Daniel (2011) 'Thinking, fast and slow', Farrar, Straus and Giroux, various pages.
- (7) Horowitz, S. (2012) 'The universal sense: How hearing shapes the mind', Bloomsbury, New York, various pages.
- (8) Landor (2015) 'Landor's 2016 trends forecast', available at: <http://landor.com/thinking/landors-2016-trends-forecast> (accessed 6th May, 2016).
- (9) Harvard Business Review (2014) 'What does your brand sound like?', available at: <https://hbr.org/2014/02/what-does-your-brand-sound-like> (accessed 6th May, 2016).
- (10) Ibid., ref. 2 above.
- (11) North, A. C. and Hargreaves, D. J. (2007) 'How music can make your brand sing', available at: <http://www.creativematch.com/news/feature-how-music-can-make/93560/> (accessed 6th May, 2016).
- (12) Ibid., ref. 2 above.
- (13) Kemp, B. J. (1973) 'Reaction time of young and elderly subjects in relation to perceptual deprivation and signal-on versus signal-off condition', *Developmental Psychology*, Vol. 8, pp. 268–272.
- (14) Beckerman, J. (2014) 'The Sonic Boom: How sound transforms the way we think feel and buy', Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, Boston, MA.