

MARKETING MISTAKES:

THE CONSUMERS AND THE PET SHOP BOYS

Bradford G. Boyle
Marketing Mistakes
MBA 674-01
Spring, 1989

Brad -

The most
interesting paper
I have read & heard
in quite awhile. You
should feel quite proud
of yourself for being a
very creative person.
Nice project!

100/100

It was good having
you in class again.
Final course
grade

A

Now I really you
can't see you
working but
allstate.

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INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Entry into the music industry can follow many paths. The usual route is for a band to spend time, perhaps years, playing live, usually on the "bar circuit." This strategy, while well-established, is both capital and labor intensive and has no guarantee of success. The Consumers¹, a Salt Lake based band, attempted to reach success (signified by the signing of a recording contract) via the marketing technique of mass submission of demo tapes² to record producers and companies, thus avoiding the cost and time involved in developing a following. The Consumers failed in their attempt.

The Pet Shop Boys³, an English group, form a basis for comparison with The Consumers since they achieved phenomenal success before ever playing live.⁴ This case will examine the two bands in a marketing perspective in order to better understand why one succeeded and one failed.

IDENTIFICATION AND ANALYSIS OF MARKETING FACTORS

PRICING

Pricing is not a relevant component of the marketing mix in this case study. Since demo tapes are supplied free of charge to the record companies, pricing does not exist. Pricing strategies come into play only after the band has been signed and an album is released. Since product success for the purpose of this analysis occurs prior to the album's release, pricing as a marketing element may be ignored.

PRODUCT

The primary component of the product can be defined as the songs recorded on the demo tape. However, the marketing elements of product and promotion are easily blurred in the recording industry since promotion can become product-- i.e. hype can sell in an entertainment industry. However, for the purpose of this case we will consider the aforementioned components: product, and band image, with the accompanying facets (name, logo, etc.) as part of the promotional marketing mix.

Modern music culture is composed of many genres. "Rock and Roll" would be defined as a market subdivision, and it can be further fragmented into smaller components. Examples would included heavy metal, pop, or new wave. Each component is typically represented by a certain style of music, and is supported by fans who identify with it and lend their support to it. Like any business, a band should target a specific market when it produces its demo tape. "The business-minded tunesmith must channel his or her creativity by viewing the song's commercial potential from the standpoint of the target audience." ⁵ The Consumers lacked such market direction; they simply assumed that a market existed for, or would be created by, their music.

what an unusual group - the Pet Shop Boys isn't an unusual name for a group of course

In contrast, The Pet Shop Boys created their sound with a specific market in mind: the disco dance market. ⁶ Because of Tennant's exposure to the market he received as editor of Smash Hits, he was able to "closely watch the rise of such pop groups

who needs reference before using the name

the Pet Shop Boys isn't exactly overblown

as Culture Club, Duran, Duran, Wham!, and Frankie Goes to
Hollywood."⁷

Having identified their target market, The Pet Shop Boys further refined their marketing strategy by targeting a certain industry leader, Bobby O' Orlando, a New York based dance-record producer. The group specifically attempted to re-create the disco sounds of two groups produced by O' Orlando, The Flirts and Bobby O. While in New York City to interview Sting, Tennant contacted O' Orlando and within hours had signed a recording contract.⁸

Rather than identifying a specific target market, The Consumers simply wrote a collection of songs and sent them out blindly to producers and companies. In retrospect, many of the songs did appeal to some.⁹ The songs possessed an intellectual bent but, for the most part, to pop rock music. In addition, some members of the band did possess some knowledge of the industry. The guiding force behind the band, Ward Spring, played in and produced The Urge, a band which became quite popular in Salt Lake City, and later scored a small degree of success in the tough Los Angeles marketplace. However, all these successes involved live performances, and no knowledge of the procedures of securing a recording contract were developed, thus none was transferred to The Consumers.

PLACE

As noted previously, The Pet Shop Boys originated from London and secured their recording contract in person in New York City. Both cities are acknowledged bell-weather music scenes, allowing both recognition of the current trends in the industry as well as the opportunity for in-person contact with industry personnel. In contrast, The Consumers were headquartered in Salt Lake City, which eliminated any direct contact (except through electronic means) with the new trends of the business. Additionally, no major industry professionals are based in Salt Lake City, precluding any face-to-face contact.

PROMOTION

Although not tested in the marketplace since no recording contract was secured, The Consumers appeared to possess an innovative band name which was easily remembered and allowed for "theme" songs as well as creative logo design and other promotional aspects. The logo was composed of an empty shopping cart (Appendix C) and the demo tape was titled Blue Light Special; a take-off of the infamous K-Mart in-store sales. Additionally, many of the songs used consumer related topics. "Plastic Debt" was a ballad about credit card bills, while "Marlboro Man" was a parody of the old cigarette ads. Song titles can be very important to the success of a song: "Many songwriters feel that a good title is half the song. The

Consumers appear to have developed an intergrated concept for the band with the consumer image, and might have been in a position to effectively use it if a contract had been signed. However, since no contract was ever signed, it a subjective guess to say if the image was effective or not.

The Pet Shop Boys have succeeded by capitalizing on the music industry trend of androgynous groups. The trend has a long history in rock and roll, but did not achieve widespread consumer acceptance until bands such as Culture Club and The Eurythmics emerged in the early 1980's. The bands name is linked by some to "gay perversion", and Tennant and Lowe are repeatably rumored to be lovers.¹⁰ Tennant and Lowe deny the allegations, but there can be no argument that they make a concerted attempt to keep and maintain their androgynous image which has so far been very effective in selling albums.

WHAT CAN BE LEARNED

Quick successes in the music industry are rumors and nothing more.

In his research, the author could not locate even one "overnight" sensation which in reality did not spend a substantial amount of time and effort to succeed in the industry. No band was identified that was signed without playing live and on the basis of a single demo tape, except The Pet Shop Boys.

The music industry is similiar to others in that a target market should be specified before a product is produced.

Simply putting out a demo tape with no particular audience in mind is a sure road to failure; it falls into the "better mousetrap" fallacy and faces enourmously long odds of success. *true*

A well researched, very specific, plan of attack can be effective; as The Pet Shop Boys showed.

Industry awareness of trends is crucial.

The pulse of the marketplace should be continually monitored, and bands should place themself in a position to do so. Trends change quickly, and reliance on the electronic media is not effective, as trends will have already begain to change by the time music is to the broadcast stage. Geographic location is important to monitor these trends; New York and London are *always* much better locations than Salt Lake City.

Personal contacts and network are essential elements of the industry.

Simply having the connections to get a record producer to listen to your demo tape may be one of the most important elements of success. Once again, alienation from the major markets may prove deadly to hopeful bands. Personal contacts and

networks should be developed and effectively utilized. Unsolicited demo tapes sent by mail provide little impetus for a record executive to take the time to listen; face-to-face contact is much more effective.

The music industry is a difficult business to succeed in.

Barriers to entry are high in this industry. Competition is intense-- in 1985 there were over 10,000 registered bands in Los Angeles alone.¹¹ Trends change quickly, and are difficult to predict, especially so if the band does not possess a favorable geographic location. It is capital and labor intensive to form a viable band, and a high degree of commitment is needed. The Consumers did not appear to possess this commitment-- it appears they hoped to succeed simply by recording a demo tape and blindly mailing it to record producers and companies.

10/10

grammar
style, etc

5/5

ENDNOTES

1

The Consumers were a Salt Lake based band composed of four members: Ward Spring, Brad Boyle, Bill Boyle, and Darrin Newland. It should be noted that the author of this case is Brad Boyle, and thus some subjectivity may have subconsciously arose. The case proved to be a difficult project, perhaps resulting from this subjectivity.

2

"Demo tape" is industry lingo for "demonstration tape", which is defined as "A demonstration recording of a song produced for the purpose of displaying the song's potential to music industry personnel." For an excellent discussion on demo tapes, see Mark & Cathy Liggett's Songwriting: An Insider's Guide to Making it in the Music Industry (New York, New York: New American Library, 1985), pp. 41-59.

3

The Pet Shop Boys is a two man band composed of Neil Tennant and Chris Lowe. This phenomenally successful British group sold several million copies of their albums before ever playing live.

4

It was believed by the members of The Consumers that their strategy was a viable one to enter the industry, and had in fact been followed by many groups that had achieved success. An example would be The Violent Femmes-- it was widely accepted that the band was signed on the basis of a single demo tape. However, during the course of the research for this case, the author came to the conclusion that these stories were, in fact, fiction, and amounted to no more than recordingland fables. The Violent Femmes in reality suffered several long hard years performing live, often on the street corner for tips. Thus it would appear the very basic marketing plan of The Consumers was flawed from the outset, effectively eliminating the band's chances before it had any. The Pet Shop Boys were chosen for comparison because they were the only band the author identified in his research that sold a million copies of their record before playing a live performance.

5

Liggett, Songwriting: An Insider's Guide to Making it in the Music Industry pp. 3-4.

6

The term "disco dance market" may create confusion if viewed outside music industry jargon. The phrase describes percussion-oriented dance music, usually within a New Wave genre, and not the popular image of "John Travolta music."

7

Michael Goldberg, "Golden Opportunities", Rolling Stone, October 23, 1986, pp 28-29. This brings up another area in which The Consumers were lacking: insider contacts and awareness. The Consumers were located in Salt Lake City, Utah, which is about as far from the music business as you can get, while Tennant of The Pet Shop Boys was editor of the most popular music review magazine in England, which allowed for industry trend awareness as well as for personal networking from within the industry.

8

Ibid.

9

For example, "Billy Pilgram Blues". The song was based upon the adventures of Billy Pilgram, a fictional character found in Kurt Vonnegut's Slaughterhouse Five. Mr. Vonnegut's response to the song can be found in Appendix A. The lyrics can be found in Appendix B, and the recorded song Appendix D. It should be stated the tape copy enclosed was recorded on substandard equipment, and is not reflective of the quality of the demo tape.

10

Peter Pickrow and Amy Appleby, The Billboard Book of Songwriting (New York, New York: Billboard Publications, Inc., 1988) p. 47. *very interesting*

11

Goldburg, "Golden Opportunities", p 29.

12

Quoting Mike Clawson in a conversation of April 10, 1989. Mike Clawson was employed as the manager of The Urge, Ward Spring's band that achieved some degree of success in Los Angeles.

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June 6, 1986

Dear Bill Boyle & Bradford G. Boyle & Darrin A. Newland
& Ward Spring --

I thank you for your tape, to which I gave my complete attention in perfect solitude last night. I am honored and elated that musicians of your generation have made some use of the thoughts of an old geezer from the World War Two generation. That's the cigarette generation, too. When I was a soldier, there were ~~free~~ cigarettes in every food ration, and I still smoke like crazy. Hooking soldiers on cigarettes was not only a rotten idea from a respiratory point of view. It was also the worst sort of military science. What does a smoker want when he's pinned down for hours, and the enemy is looking for the slightest clue as to his hidingplace? So he lights up to calm his nerves. This works ~~very well~~ well at night.

I particularly admired "Plastic Debt." Your generation of song writers speaks much more to the point than Dylan's did. He hinted at all sorts of big stuff, but never got at all specific. So I like your stuff better than his. One line which bothered me in the otherwise excellent "Billy Pilgrim Blues" was this one: "I haven't fought in a war, do they still have those things any more?" The wars, and this is true even of wars involving Americans, have never stopped. I recommend that you mourn or mock or whatever those who died in wars this very day, and who will die tomorrow, and on and on. Our wars have never stopped for a minute, not even in Salt Lake City, Utah. Wait till you see the morning paper!

Cheers,

Kurt Vonnegut

A large, stylized handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'Kurt Vonnegut' with a large 'K' and a long horizontal stroke.

APPENDIX A

BILLY PILGRIM BLUES 4:00

Greetings Trafamadorians!
Tonight has been...
Tonight will be...
Tonight is...

With apologies to Mr. Vonnegut
Wt. Kurt.

I've got the Billy Pilgrim Blues
Cause I know exactly what I'm going to do
I know exactly where I've been
With no free will there is no sin

Everybody skips all the time
Billy did it both ahead and behind
Time doesn't pass, it only flows
If you pay attention you can see where it goes

I've got the Billy Pilgrim Blues
Cause I know exactly what I'm going to do
I know exactly where I've been
With no free will there is no sin

And I don't know what it's all for
But I've never been to Trafamador
Just the sum total of my thoughts right now
When Spot barks he goes bow-wow

I've got the Billy Pilgrim Blues
Cause I know exactly what I'm going to do
I know exactly where I've been
With no free will there is no sin

I haven't ever fought in a war
Do they still have those things anymore?
If you feel sorry for Edgar you don't understand
Everything goes according to plan

I've got the Billy Pilgrim Blues
Cause I know exactly what I'm going to do
I know exactly where I've been
With no free will there is no sin

Now I live in a dome
It's where I call my home
Billy lives just over there
He'll die soon but doesn't care

I've got the Billy Pilgrim Blues...

APPENDIX B



The Consumers

APPENDIX C

The Consumers
Blue Light Special

Side One: Plastic Debt/Billy Pilgrim Blues/Data Collector
Side Two: Marlboro Man/Track One/Blither