

Creativity: We Know it when We Hear it. What Brand Marketers Can Learn from Pop Musicians

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David Bowie. Annie Lennox. Jim Morrison. Prince. Gwen Stephani. Jimmy Page. Stevie Wonder. Peter Gabriel.

You can hear them in your mind's ear, Bowie belting "Suffragette City"; or Annie Lennox's masterpiece of heartache wrapped in a pop bow, "Walking on Broken Glass".

When thinking about these disparate artists (brands) whose styles and identities created millions of loyal fans (consumers), there's a core commonality. They realized that in order for their work to be heard, their music and performing personas had to be different. Not just good or polished, but distinctive. And that, dear marketer, is the essence of innovation and creativity -- distinction with a purpose; being relevant yet different. Devotion to that cause can energize the marketing and new product process, and take us somewhere truly inspired.

Lest you think those crazy musicians have it easy and don't have to answer to consumers the way we marketers do, think again. To be a successful recording artist you have to deliver the basics, the building blocks of a strong song. You'll need a hooky zeitgeist phrase like "*I ain't no Holla Back, Girl!*" And you'll want a killer rhythm track like Prince's "This is the Life of the Party". But in addition, the great performers know that everything they create must also be fresh and then filtered through their unique point of view (brand equity). Sometimes the result becomes Led Zeppelin IV or the Beatles White Album. How would you like to have a new product like that in your pipeline?

Remarkably however, not one of these musical masterpieces was tested before it was aired. After Stevie Wonder wrote "I Just Called to say I Love You", his manager didn't ramble off BASES scores to tell him about purchase intent, or to identify which verses didn't connect with listeners. No, these pioneers write, refine, record and launch. Now, there's a scary thought.

As business people eager for innovation, we acknowledge the need to "think outside the box", to develop "blue oceans" where we can define

our own product categories. We hold ideation sessions, attend focus groups, watch ethnography until we're bleary eyed.

Yet our good intentions face the real pressures of next quarter's earnings, shrinking shelf space, or hitting a price point. We experience corporate cultures that talk organic growth yet act incrementally. It's real, normal and understandable.

But our customers don't care about your board of directors, strategic plans or corporate politics. They simply demand that we offer them something uncommon, something they haven't seen, heard, or tasted before. Otherwise, what's their motivation to seek out our products? And happily, true creativity pointed in the right direction pays off Bigtime, "*I'm on my way, I'm making it*", whether with a hit song or an iPod revolution. To witness how creativity steals market share, ask Eric Burdon, the brilliant songwriter and lead singer of The Animals. Burdon was an influential force in The British Invasion, the 60's tsunami that gave America the Beatles and the Rolling Stones, among others.

During an A&E interview, Burdon told a story about Pete Townsend and Eric Clapton. They were competitors and not on speaking terms when Townsend suddenly called Clapton to suggest they go to the movies. Clapton agreed and found himself sitting for hours next to a silent Townsend. Finally, Clapton looked up and said, "Peter, is there a reason why you invited me here?"

Pale and shaken, Townsend looked at Clapton and replied, "Eric, there's this black dude named Jimi Hendrix, and he's going to put us both out of business."

If we want to take some of our competition's business, we might start by taking a page from the Jimi Hendrix songbook. Don't fear creativity. Embrace it, nourish it, and guide it along. Then watch what it does for your bottom line.