

Talent Representation and Promotion in Today's Music Industry

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Abstract

The music industry is a complex and ever-changing system, and understanding how to effectively represent an artist is essential for success in the field. This research focused on the evolution of the role of music management and promotion in today's music industry. The study used convenience sampling to conduct in-depth interviews with current industry professionals, focusing on industry consolidation, social media, and on-demand streaming services, and how they affect music and artist promotion. Ultimately, while promotions have become more focused on digital marketing and streaming sites, traditional methods of promotion are still relevant, and industry consolidation has not had a profound effect on the promotion of artists and their music.

I. Introduction

This study focused on the recent evolution of music management and promotion and sought to discover what methods and practices are most effective. The music industry is an immensely complex and ever-changing system, and understanding how to effectively represent an artist is essential for anyone entering the field. The consolidation of major record labels, emergence of digital marketing and social media platforms, and the growing trend of music streaming all have major implications for the way that managers and labels represented music and artists. Thus, this study tried to determine the extent of the industry's response to these changes. By conducting in-depth interviews with industry professionals, this study sought to find suitable industry strategies to promote new and established artists, and appropriate methods managers should embrace.

II. Literature Review

Becoming a rock star or a pop idol has fascinated the world's population since the advent of major music distribution. Yet the music industry is a consistently changing field, and the methods of promoting artists and their talents have not been immune to change. While there are still traditional record labels offering contracts to artists, there are many artists who have opted to use new technologies as a way to gain popularity. Social media has become an influential tool for artists and their management teams, but it is yet to be determined whether or not it can fully replace the traditional model of promotion.

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On Consolidation

The music industry, as defined in this paper, refers to all organizations that partake in the creation, production, distribution, and marketing of music. The industry operates as an oligopoly. Sony Music Entertainment, Universal Music Group, and Warner Music Group, known as the “majors,” control more than 40% of the industry's market share (An Overview of The Recorded Music Industry). Following almost a decade of shrinking, the industry is slowly starting to rebound and is slated for its second straight year of sales growth, with spending on recorded music growing by 8.1% in the first half of 2016 (Shaw).

One of the major shifts in the industry is the transition from a goods-based industry to a service-based industry. Whereas previously music was sold in hardcopy and paired with merchandise, much of music distribution has transitioned into streaming sites, such as Pandora, Amazon Prime Music, Apple Music, or Spotify. The shift to the internet as a main source of music delivery means that popular music taste is determined by digital providers, which results in an increased necessity for artists and managers alike to gain their attention. Many streaming services serve as major source of revenue for labels. This system is primarily due to lower production and distribution costs, while still allowing labels to maintain control over the terms of copyright and distribution (Burkart 497). Sony, Warner, and Universal all reported streaming as their largest source of revenue during the first quarter of 2016 (Raine 38).

Unfortunately, streaming services are not required to pay artists, but rather are responsible for paying those who hold the rights. In the case of Spotify, the major labels are keeping 73% of the after-tax profits, while the artists are only receiving 11% (Raine 40). These numbers reinforce the importance of the managerial role to successfully negotiate other contract areas for potential artist revenues. Equally daunting, in the face of declining revenues from music sales, labels are offering “ancillary revenue sharing” deals, which allows them to take a portion or all of an artist's proceeds from, for example, merchandise sales and tours. According to Peter Mensch, manager of the Red Hot Chili Peppers, these “360-deals” should be avoided: “We will do everything and anything in our power to stop the majors from grabbing any share of non-recorded income from our bands” (“Special Report”). Considering artists don't see a majority of the profits from their music, it is important that their other streams of income remain theirs, a responsibility that ultimately falls on the manager.

Another area that has been significantly impacted by consolidation is the concert booking aspect of the industry. Whereas concert booking used to be primarily handled between managers, artists, and promoters, the industry experienced a massive consolidation that altered this dynamic. Before consolidation, the artist and promoter would split the profits of ticket sales, usually 85/15 in favor of the artist. Promoter-artist relationships were vital and beneficial to both parties. Personal relationships built on trust ensured that the artists were getting a fair deal, and “buy-back” agreements could be reached, which gave the promoter proverbial “dibs” on the artist's next tour dates (White and Preston 15). Consolidation, however, caused a major power shift away from artists, and with increasingly fewer booking options, venues began to throw their weight around. Ticket prices rose, loopholes were found in the form of box seats, and secondary ticket brokers entered the picture, making huge profits by buying tickets and selling them at marked up prices, with none of the profits being shared by the artist. To combat the shift in power, managers should be extra diligent in preparing contracts and riders to ensure that the artist is receiving a portion of all ticket and merchandise sales, and is not being exploited for their popularity by venue sponsorships or signage (White and Preston 24). The most concerning aspect of consolidation in the concert industry is the decrease of independent promoters; It is increasingly difficult for upcoming artists to break through and book major venues with a fair deal. “The artist manager has become the artist's sole support system” (White and Preston 28). In the newly consolidated industry, managers must be careful to ensure that their artists are presented with the opportunities they deserve at a fair price.

On Social Media

There is no doubt that social media and digital marketing have become central to the music industry. The question becomes whether or not these methods of promotion are sufficient to acquire a substantial fan base. If operating under the assumption that reviews beget popularity and fans, the simple answer is yes: “artists who have more social media resources . . . have significantly higher chances to get reviewed than artists with fewer resources” (Verboor and Nord 67). It would appear, however, that a strong online presence is not enough to garner significant popularity on its own. While artists have the increasing ability to record

and share their own music online, “these opportunities are largely confined to niche or ‘peripheral’ market. . . . Moving beyond this still requires the intervention of the industry’s traditional ‘middlemen’” (Preston and Rogers 16). Gaining mass sales and popularity is still reliant on “the support of more traditional tastemakers, most especially radio” (Preston and Rogers 16). Traditional support or not, geographical location has also proven to be a reliable predictor of critical audience attention. “More central artists receive more institutional reviews, even when we take into consideration that they differ in terms of nationality, hit albums, album type, and social media resources” (Verboor and Nord 68). Therefore, one of the major considerations for gaining artist popularity is still the geographical location of the artist. While social media can have a positive effect on an artist’s popularity, it does not make up for the deficit in attention from physical location.

On Streaming

The power to stream any song via the internet to a plethora of devices has caused a revolution in the music industry. There are a few different methods for streaming: internet radio, such as Pandora; streaming on demand services, such as Spotify or Apple Music; video streaming, such as YouTube; and on demand services like Music Choice (“An Overview of The Recorded Music Industry”). For this study, the focus was on on-demand streaming services. The big players in this market are Spotify and Apple Music, although Amazon.com has also recently released its own platform, Amazon Prime Music. Initially, there was great concern with streaming services and the lack of revenue that they were producing. With the recent addition of paid subscription services, however, the tide has turned and the industry is beginning to see profit. The “Big Three” all reported gains this year, and the streaming revenue in the United States grew 57% to \$1.6 billion (Shaw). That being said, there are still significant numbers of people who are choosing to use the free, ad-supported versions of streaming sites, which is detrimental to the industry income from streaming.

On the Manager Role

With these developments of industry consolidation, social media and streaming, what are artist managers and representatives to do? First of all, “it is crucial to keep in mind that artistic creativity and managerial creativity are interdependent . . . Artistic creativity cannot flourish without managerial creativity” (Morrow 4). Managerial creativity can only do so much for an artist, so it is important for managers to know what to look for in emerging acts. Less than 5% of artists signed to a major company will break-even, let alone earn a profit (Seifert and Hadida 790). According to George Stein, there are several prerequisites to look for: Artists must have the ability to write good songs, sing, perform, and play an instrument. They must be a talented musician and be focused, smart, ambitious, good looking, and young (Morrow 6). There are also those who use artist “valuations” to determine whether or not an artist is worth signing. There are three different methods: performance-based (sales figures, awards, profits), theory-driven (quality of the voice, musical knowledge, intelligence), and intuition (gut feelings, more useful with experienced managers) (Seifert and Hadida 798). Choosing the right artist is essential to the success of music managers. Ideally, an artist and a manager should complement one another’s creative strengths and weaknesses.

Depending on the artist and manager, there are different options to pursue in distributing music.

An artist who possesses all of these attributes has the following options: sign directly with an . . . independent or major label; source a deal with a multinational out of a smaller market and have the product released . . . through an inter-company license agreement; or license or assign the right to exploit the copyright on a pre-existing record to a label” (Morrow 7).

Each avenue has its advantages and pitfalls, and managers and artists should discuss each in detail before making a decision.

The music, however, is only one focus of many for modern-day managers, who should be searching for revenue elsewhere to combat declining profits from music sales. “New forms of collaboration with brands are a central revenue source and require a broader business and digital savvy from the artist manager to envision and evaluate opportunities effectively” (Peckham). These sponsorships can become even more lucrative if the manager cultivates a secure relationship, which may help artists enter an equity-based partnership or even eventually help them launch their own companies (Peckham). Successful managers

have “intuition and capacity for improvisation” (Seifert and Hadida 800), or in other words, they must be able to think on their feet and trust their gut when making quick decisions. The modern-day manager role is “one part venture capitalist, one part entrepreneur” (Peckham), monitoring the industry and always finding new and creative ways to connect their artists.

III. Methods

For this study, in-depth interviews were conducted over the phone with four music industry professionals. The interviewees were selected via convenience sampling.

Questions focused around the role and involvement of the interviewees in the music industry. There were also specific questions about industry consolidation, social media and online music streaming (see Appendix for full questionnaire). The goal of the interviews was to gain firsthand insight into how artists are being promoted in today's industry, and how managers are working to adapt to the increasingly digital and consolidated landscape.

The first interview was with Tom Mullen, senior director for creative and marketing partnerships at Sony Music Entertainment. Mullen is responsible for global creative marketing for an artist's released material, and works as the conduit between marketing, artists and repertoire (A&R), and digital and public relations, and has worked with major artists, such as Bob Dylan, Michael Jackson, and Paul Simon. The second interview was conducted with Mariah Czap, a project manager at Yep Roc Records, a small independent music label in Hillsborough, N.C. Czap works as the primary contact for artists during release campaigns, overseeing and managing the marketing plans for the campaigns, in addition to monitoring the sales to determine the effectiveness of marketing and promotions.

Additional interviews were also conducted with Alex Rolecek and Andrew Bennett. Rolecek is an integrated producer and film director for Townhouse, a company under Grey Advertising, and directs and produces commercials with CoverGirl, Pantene, and Koleston. Rolecek has experience working with high-profile pop stars on commercial sets, and was able to provide insights into his relationships with their managers. Bennett, CEO and co-founder of KnowledgePost, shared his knowledge of the changing music industry landscape and how artists are rebranding themselves and shifting to alternate sources of income.

IV. Findings and Discussion

On Consolidation

Despite the consolidation of major record labels into what are known as “the Big Three” (Sony Music Entertainment, Universal Music Group, and Warner Music Group), the methods of promoting artists and their music remain relatively unchanged. Mullen explained that there are no real positive or negative connotations for consolidation, and that the playing field is level. “It's all about the music and how you're marketing it. An independent [label] can come out with the same thing as a major.” Despite the bigger pockets of the major labels, the emergence of streaming sites has helped to reduce radio's stranglehold on the market. “Everybody is on the same playing field because so much discovery is done via playlisting” (Czap). Whereas radio used to determine what people listened to, the increase in channels has proved beneficial for artists with less mainstream styles.

When dealing with labels, carefully reading and negotiating contracts is crucial, Mullen said. Bringing an entertainment lawyer to the table is essential to ensure that the artist and manager are both fully aware of the extent of the contract, and be able to secure a fair deal. There are advantages and disadvantages to signing with a major or independent label, and the decision should reflect the overall goal of the band.

“Overall, people sign to labels because you have a team of people working with you. If you want to go it alone, the music might suffer. Focus on the music, trust people with you on your team to help and be knowledgeable and make those decisions” (Mullen).

Czap agreed, saying that while some artists can “go it alone,” getting a deal with a label is certainly beneficial: “I do think, with a label you get a lot of support, connections and knowledge about the industry” (Czap). Regardless of consolidation, there are opportunities everywhere for new and emerging artists.

“It’s not like what’s on the radio and what’s happening on YouTube is what’s really happening. Now with the internet and so many places for people to consume music, there’s (sic) these niches of audiences, and that’s where I talk about level playing field. You can have an artist, have a big thing that you and I never would have heard about, and that can happen for an independent label or a major” (Mullen).

While there are those that might argue that these niche audiences could be bigger if major labels and radio distributed more independent artists, most artists do not feel shortchanged. “When you work with an independent label, I think there’s an understanding. I don’t think anybody thinks they’re missing out” (Czap).

On Social Media

The emergence of social media and digital marketing has had major implications on the way that labels and artists promote their music. When asked what are the best platforms for promotion, Mullen and Czap had different responses. Mullen said that there is no one-size-fits-all model for digital: “The music industry is not math, and it’s not paint-by-numbers. Every artist is different, every platform is different, and every fan base is different, and it goes back to your goal” (Mullen). He explained that the only way to know what works is a combination of trial and error and data analytics. “The amount of data that I go through and look at determines what I’m doing, it’s not just gut” (Mullen). Conversely, Czap didn’t seem to have such a data-driven approach. At Yep Roc, they focus mainly on Facebook and Twitter for sales-based posts: “We’ll tout highlights . . . anything worth bragging about or highlighting” (Czap).

Facebook posts that get the most organic attention these days include a visual element. It is especially effective when users can watch embedded videos directly from their newsfeed. Paid reach is also extremely effective: “We do a lot of Facebook advertising. A post that we put money behind will obviously get way more interaction” (Czap). Sharing artist content is also beneficial: “An easy way to supplement a post is to find an artist tweet that says what you want to say and just retweet it” (Czap). It is worth noting that while content with a visual element will boost organic reach, there does not seem to be much difference when it comes to audio. “Studies show that shareability is not very connected to the audio or the presence of music” (Rolecek). Contrary to Facebook and Twitter, where many posts are focused on driving sales or advertising, Instagram is primarily used when people attend concerts or festivals.

Despite the increasing presence of digital and social media, labels are still reaching out and promoting via traditional print methods for different audiences: “That has not gone away at all. They’re still being pitched and they still make an impact” (Mullen). Newspapers, magazines, and other traditional media are not as obsolete as some people think, and are still effective in reaching certain target audiences.

On Streaming

Streaming sites like Spotify, Apple Music, and Amazon Prime Music are becoming increasingly more popular among listeners, and have found their way into the managerial and promotional aspects of the industry. “I’d say in the past year and a half or two years, streaming has become the number one focus, and I would say that that’s probably true for everyone” (Czap). Bennett also weighed in on the influence of streaming services: “These other channels have broadened the industry and the ability for artists to get out there and get known. It certainly helps from an exposure standpoint.” Yet there are concerns about artists being fairly compensated by these streaming services, and some major artists like Taylor Swift have removed their music from Spotify in protest. “The places that you make money now are out on the road, that’s why you see so many people doing concerts these days” (Bennett). Mullen, while not able to comment on specific numbers, did say that music sales are rarely a sole source of income for artists: “You need to have varied sources of income . . . if you’re just relying on streaming for a source of income, you don’t understand the music industry” (Mullen). Instead of relying exclusively on music sales, managers should be looking at their artists “holistically, like a brand” (Bennett). Sponsorships, merchandise, and touring are all other lucrative areas for managers to explore. While streaming is popular, CDs and vinyl sales are not dying off as drastically

as some people suspect. The biggest challenge currently facing streaming is education: "The idea is to help people to come onto the premium services. You want people to understand that this is something that they can pay for every month and it's worth it" (Mullen).

In terms of artists garnering more attention on streaming services, the approach has changed. Previously, labels would deliver entire albums to streaming sites. Nowadays, the focus is on distributing singles before the album: "Our streaming strategy is we pick three tracks that we will focus on before the record comes out. Each one of those singles has a street date, and we formulate a campaign around each of those singles" (Czap). Relationships with streaming services are also essential to getting artists featured, and abiding by their "best practices." Yep Roc Records ensures that artists are active on streaming platforms, tagging, and interacting on social media, using contesting, and other methods that are "constantly showing that we are an equally good partner to them" (Czap). While many major artists hold many of the playlist spots, independent labels and artists still have plenty of opportunity to be featured. "[Independent labels] have people at all of these places and there's (sic) spots for them. There's (sic) places in playlists, there's pitching, all of those things happen for everybody" (Mullen). Establishing and maintaining relationships with the streaming services is essential to getting featured on key playlists, regardless of label affiliation.

On the Manager Role

The reality is that being a music manager is a complicated business, and there is no single "right" way to do the responsibilities. Above and beyond all else, however, a manager must have a strong network within the music industry to be effective. "You have to understand the industry, and have relationships and know friends so you can help your band out" (Mullen). Having established relationships in various places makes all the difference in the industry. "A lot of artists that we work with have ties to other artists. We might work with a band and their manager also works with someone trying to get a record deal" (Czap).

Relationships are important, and both internal and external communications serve as vital tools to maintain key relationships and ensure that they are beneficial to all parties. First and foremost, managers must be able to communicate with their artists. A successful manager is "someone who has the band's best interest in mind but can also be straight with them. You are the band's champion but there is also something to said about managers who can be honest" (Czap). This can be especially helpful when dealing with sponsors or brand deals. A potential pitfall with these deals is that the artist may not understand the interdependence of the relationship, which may end up costing them the deal. These arrangements work best when "there is an appreciation and a sense of reciprocity of what the talent is bringing to the project, and what the project is bringing to the talent" (Rolecek). Good managers will work to find solutions that appeal to all parties, as these relationships are privileges for both the talent and the brand, and should be treated as such.

One of the biggest challenges for a manager is finding artists that are worth representing. A majority of artists will never make it big or even break even, so it is important to know what to look for: "If you bat 1 for 10 on a band, you're doing OK" (Mullen). As previously mentioned, having connections with other bands and being able to network are positives when looking at artists. Bands that have already found a way to establish themselves and relate to their audience are standout candidates. "It's touring and understanding digital, and having each person in that band be able to take something on. In today's band, you have to know all those things and where your audience is, and what you need to be writing and posting" (Mullen). Every band member must be able to contribute something to the success and marketability of the band.

Overall, what is essential for anyone going into representation is a comprehensive understanding of the industry. Knowing how to reach audiences, having connections in the right places, being able to think creatively and actively, and having knowledge of the industry are the traits that set great managers apart.

V. Conclusion

The music industry has had to deal with some major changes in recent history, including the consolidation of major record labels, development of widespread social media and digital marketing platforms, and the emergence of music streaming technologies. This study tried to determine how these industry changes have affected the methods of promotion of artists and their music.

Overall, the artist manager's role and the industry itself have not seen as much of a shift in recent years as assumed. Managers are still primarily responsible for having thorough knowledge of the music industry, being able to speak openly and honestly with their artist, and making connections that help their clients. While significant consolidation has occurred among the major labels that produce pop music, the work of independent artists and labels still reaches the appropriate audiences. Social media and digital marketing have taken a more primary role in today's promotions, but the traditional methods of advertising in print are still used to reach various target audiences. While these tools can be used for self-promotion, industry professionals are in agreement that support of labels' personnel and budgets are invaluable for artists. The trend of streaming music continues to grow in popularity, but it has not eliminated the demand for hardcopy CD or vinyl sales.

Future studies looking to expand on this topic should include a wider breadth of interviews with music industry professionals. Having a variety of input across different genres, label size, and position within a label will help to provide more comprehensive understanding of the industry as a whole. Specifically focusing on people in A&R departments will help form an understanding of what professionals are looking for in artists, and interviewing managers will provide direct insight into day-to-day promotions.

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Appendix: Base Questionnaire

General

1. How long have you worked in the music industry?
2. What is your current position?
3. What career path has led to where you are now?
4. Who are the major artists that you work with?
5. What are criteria you look for when selecting which artists to represent?
6. Are there certain artists that serve as the model for promotion?
7. Which managers have been most successful in recent years? What do you think their success is owed to?

Consolidation

1. In your experience, has there been significant consolidation among the industry?
 - a. Record labels, concert venues, music outlets?

If Yes:

2. How has consolidation affected your role as a talent representative?
3. Do you see consolidation as a positive or negative trend for the industry? Why?

Social Media

1. What are some methods you use to promote artists?
 - a. Has interactive and social media begun to replace traditional methods?
 - b. Are certain social media sites more effective than others?
2. When promoting artists via social media, what forms of media are the most effective (music videos, pictures, status updates, etc.)
3. Would you say that record labels are threatened by social media and self-promotion?
4. As the representative, are you mostly responsible for creating content for promotion, or are there other teams that work on this? The artists themselves?
5. As the manager, do you have any influence on creative content? Do you typically try to arrange for certain musicians to collaborate?

Streaming

1. Have music streaming sites changed the approach to promoting music? If so, how so?
 2. With actual proceeds from music sales decreasing, where are the major revenues to be had?
 3. Are there ways to use streaming sites to your advantage?
 - a. Pay for a feature?
-