



Promoting Your Studio: Part I

●Let's speak frankly. The new year is upon us, and recording studios (both large and small) are bracing for an extremely competitive period in the months ahead. Sure, there is still money to be made and somebody will be making it, but will it be you? Many studios are now feeling the leading edge of a recession. Some will survive and perhaps even prosper, but others will, undoubtedly, fail. Economists can give us a list of causes: runaway government spending, mounting consumer debt or the

apocalyptic undertones of the Middle Eastern conflict, but these are factors beyond our reach. The upshot is that a dark cloud is hovering right now, but it will not stay forever. Eventually (if history does indeed repeat itself) the cloud will disappear, and when the sun of economic prosperity again shows its face, it will be a brand new ball game.

How can a studio make it in these uncertain times? There are no pat answers here, but one thing is obvious: the competition for pieces of an increasingly smaller pie is going to be stiff. Studios will either become motivated to succeed or simply fall by the wayside, and it seems to me that the effective use of promotional tools is going to be a key factor in survival. Let me state out front that I am not offering this advice as a person who has already cornered the recording market, but rather as one who is vying for a share, just like you. So let's examine the arsenal of promotional tools available to a studio owner.

Hence, the overhead is much lower, and the market more circumscribed.

While there are some exceptions, realistically, electronic cottages are not big contenders for major label recording budgets or glitzy advertising clients. This is not to say they don't turn out hit records or national commercials, for they do; but the main draw is for independently financed masters, demos, regional commercials, a/v projects and the whole parade of "wannabe" songwriters and vocalists seeking an affordable representation of their musical concepts. Most of these clients are interested solely in sonic value per dollar; they will not pay extra for cushy furniture or an attractive receptionist. Whether your target market is the mid-sized ad agency, the independent record producer, or the young songwriter, the point that must be transmitted in any promotional campaign is simply this: value.

PROMOTIONAL CATEGORIES

All promotional efforts fit into two basic categories: things you pay for (otherwise known as advertising), and things you get for free (otherwise known as public relations). There can actually be a lot of *cross-pollination* between these two categories, but it is nonetheless a useful distinction. For example, public relations is a relatively cost-free pursuit, unless of course, you hire a professional PR person; then, PR can cost as much as advertising. Still, the kind of promotion you get from PR can be different than that achieved through advertising. Both angles must therefore be covered.

Besides the out-of-pocket costs, what is the major difference between advertising and public relations?

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DEFINING YOUR MARKET

It should be clear that electronic cottagers have a unique profile in contrast to the larger professional studio. This requires unique strategies. Promotional techniques that work for larger studios are not always applicable. The electronic cottage (as defined in this magazine), while capable of turning out professional broadcast quality products, is typically more specialized in scope, furnished with much less expensive equipment than the larger pro shops, occupies a much smaller space, and in general, does not focus on the posh amenities which are often expected.

Circle 15 on Reader Service Card

Well, advertising can get you in the public eye right away. If you can afford to buy advertising, you can pretty well say anything you want about the service you offer and people will know of your claims very quickly. This could possibly translate into some immediate business. The downside is this: if you stop advertising, the general public will forget about you quickly.

Public relations, on the other hand, is slow, but enduring. It builds an opinion in the public eye of precisely what your business is. This dissemination of information must occur steadily over time, and results in an image that will not quickly fade away. Consistent, good PR speaks a message of assurance to a potential client. It says, "this is a reliable studio" or a "hot studio" or whatever it is the audience wants to hear in order to give you their trust.

Even if you know very little about advertising and public relations, it's easy to see from the above descriptions the clear benefits of both types of promotion, and how they can most effectively be used in conjunction with each other. To put some flesh on these general descriptions, we will now look at some specific types of advertising and PR that are appropriate for promoting a recording studio business.

TYPES OF ADVERTISING

For the purposes of this article, the discussion of advertising will be limited to print advertising, rather than broadcast advertising. Why? Not only are radio and television ads expensive, but no one has found a way to use them for studio promotion without smacking of hucksterism. TV and radio have great emotional impact, but fall short when it comes to transmitting hard information. Studios generally have found a more conservative print ad to be most effective.

There are three types of ads: space ads, classifieds and direct mail—all of which can be effective vehicles when properly targeted. Let's examine some of the factors involved in deciding which type of print advertising might work best for your studio.

SPACE ADS

These are the box-like ads that lit-

erally take up space in magazines and newspapers. They are sometimes sold by the fraction of the page they occupy (such as 1/8, 1/4, 1/2 page) or, more commonly, by the column-inch (how many standard columns wide by how many inches long).

Large professional studios have traditionally favored big space ads because they convey an aura of success and of course, cater to the vanities of their well-heeled clients. Don't forget that big studios with big investments have to spend big bucks on advertising in order to attract the big clients. I'm sure you've all seen the blown-out full color vanity ads in Billboard magazine saying something like this (to cite a fanciful, but nonetheless typical example): "Thank You Elvis Presley For Letting Chartbuster Studios Make Hound Dog The Biggest Hit Of The Year." This kind of approach will probably not work for you, since no modern-day Elvis has recorded at your studio. Scaling down the approach by thanking the local hero of the bar band circuit for recording at your studio doesn't quite cut it either.

Another approach big studios use to good advantage is the equipment sell: a sizeable ad positively glutted with the names of top shelf equipment manufacturers (i.e. Neumann, AKG, Lexicon, UREI and so on). You probably can't do that without sounding stupid either, and the bottom line is this: as an electronic cottage, you are selling a service, not an equipment list. People will come to you because they can relax and perform uninhibited in a relaxed atmosphere, and get a good product at an affordable price. That is probably what your ad should focus on.

To craft an effective ad, you must define your audience and be able to motivate them to give you a try. A friend of mine (Jim Becher of Ariel Music Design) has a yellow page ad that claims he renders "The Most Complete Songwriter Service Available." Young songwriters searching for a good studio and producer will undoubtedly call him to see if his claim is true. Such a simple ad has resulted in more business than any of his more elaborate ads in the local music and entertainment newspapers.

The point is that in a space ad, simplicity works best. After you have

carefully crafted a few phrases describing the essence of your service (your niche in the market place), you should review a few more points before laying out your ad. First, remember to leave ample white space. People today have the attention span of a fruit fly; they will not spend a whole lot of time trying to read a cluttered ad. Second, get to the heart of the matter in your copy. What is it you do best? Trying to be everything to everybody is not credible. A few well-placed words will motivate people; a confused parade of boastings will probably saturate readers' minds and turn them off. Third, choose the journal you advertise in carefully. If, for example, you are going after the singer/songwriter type, why advertise in a publication that appeals primarily to rock 'n' roll bands? If they call you, they will probably be disappointed unless you have the space to do live music efficiently, whereas the singer/songwriter will be only too happy to carefully program his song one track at a time.

To capture this audience, it might be beneficial to search out more specific avenues for reaching your market, such as the newsletters from local songwriters' associations. Finally, once you decide on a particular journal, carefully monitor the placement of your space ad on the given page. If there are lots of similar-looking ads on the page, figure out a way to make yours look different. A good graphic artist can be of immense assistance here.

CLASSIFIED ADS

According to many market researchers, the classified ad is one the most cost-effective ways of promoting a well-defined service. These ads are little, but powerful. They don't draw a lot of attention to themselves, but they do sort of weed out the casual reader. Usually, people that pour through classifieds are seriously shopping for something, and will respond to an ad that strikes a resonant chord. Beyond this, classified ads are amazingly affordable compared to space ads; you can actually afford to experiment with your format over a period of time, and once you begin to get results, you can undoubtedly afford to keep the ad in print forever.

The trick, of course, is writing an ad that doesn't make you sound like

a huckster selling snake oil remedies. We've all chuckled at the type of classifieds from some out-of-state mail order production company that offers to "put music to your song lyrics for only \$60 a song." When you use the classifieds, it's important to distance yourself from that kind of disreputable advertising. You must assume your audience will pursue you if given a legitimate opportunity, so don't resort to hyperbole.

Suppose your goal was to market a musical soundtrack production service to ad agencies who do industrial and corporate audio visual presentations. First, you must select a trade journal which services your potential audience. Then, you must write a classified ad that will encourage them to contact you. Perhaps you can offer to send a free brochure of your services and a rate card to those who request it, or for a nominal charge, a short sample cassette of your work. Let's face it, anyone who takes the time to write you a note or send you \$3.00 for a sample cassette is likely to be seriously looking for a new vendor for the kind of services you provide.

DIRECT MAIL

I've become a great fan of direct mail advertising over the past few years for one reason: I know it works, because it works on me. I've been induced to buy numerous items and services, donate to some worthy charities, get involved in political activism—all because of some letters somebody sent me. There's so much more you can say in a letter than in either a space ad or classified ad. You can really open up and make a total case for the product or service you are trying to sell. When marketing the intimacy of a small studio or production company, this can be an excellent way to go.

There is, of course, one major proviso: you need to develop an accurate mailing list of the audience you are attempting to reach. Your research needs to be current and scrupulously targeted, else you will throw your money away in postage and envelopes. Going to a commercial mailing list company may not be the best thing to do; it is expensive and may not be narrowly focused enough for a studio doing local or regional business. It is probably best to gradually

compile a list yourself from personal references or perhaps purchase a roster from a local organization (like an advertising club or a songwriters' guild). This is the tricky part. Once you've compiled a viable list you can add to it, update it and keep hammering away at the same central core of potential clients until they yell "uncle" and give you a shot at their next project. All you need, to do a direct mail campaign, is a PC and a program that will allow you to compile a list and print it out as labels.

Obviously, finding the right advertising format requires a bit of experimentation and a few dollars to invest. Still, advertising can be what makes the difference between a studio that is well-booked, and one that's stalled in its tracks. The question we must constantly answer is this: can we afford not to advertise? Advertising—especially in today's market—needs to be seen as part of our equipment; it's almost as fundamental as studio monitors.

In the next issue, we'll concentrate on the kind of promotion you can get for free: public relations for the smaller studio. 