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Ringtones and Tone Rings: Bluegrass Marketing in the Mobile Digital Age

By Larry Nager

Experian Marketing Services recently released a 73-page report, *The 2009 Digital Marketer,* which tracks a number of trends that should be of interest to those businesses?musical and otherwise?targeting the bluegrass audience. Digital marketing includes email, search engines, social networking, video games, texting and whatever they?ve come up with since I wrote this.

The greatest growth over the next five years is predicted to be in mobile digital devices?iPhones, Blackberries and other cell phone/WiFi devices.

Among their findings:

- ?Online ad spending?and especially paid search spending, is expected to remain resistant to short-term economic slowdown.?
- ?Consumer preferences are also shifting in favor of the digital landscape, while giving users greater influence and control over the relationships and experiences they have with brands?
- ?Today?s consumers want to customize the type of information they receive, how often they receive it and which channels they?d prefer.?
- ?Text messaging usage and the importance of mobile phones in general decreases with age.?
- ?Younger adults are more likely to use the Internet to get information on sports, music and entertainment, while older adults flock to the Internet for up-to-the-minute travel information.?

But the question remains, just what does this have to do with the bluegrass audience, an audience that, even as it changes and evolves, differs radically from the mainstream?

On one level, there?s good news for those marketing to the bluegrass audience. Even in this rapidly shifting, here-today-gone-tonight digital media environment, you know who your audience is.

Again, Experian reports: ?Marketers are increasingly looking for more targeted, interactive and effective means of marketing.? And ?Targeted online advertising has far out-performed standard Web pages.?

In the bluegrass world, after all, targeted advertising has always been the norm. With magazines like *Bluegrass Unlimited* and *Bluegrass Music Profiles* plus other online publications, blogs and forums like The Bluegrass Blog and Bluegrass-L; bluegrass-oriented record labels, concert and festival promoters, instrument and musical equipment makers, instructional material producers and bands have a number of proven pathways to reach their specific customers. This allows the bluegrass industry to waste less money and resources

than mainstream marketers do in their more scattershot approaches.

But those targeting the younger bluegrass audience would be wise to consider exploring mobile devices. The iPhone offers a mandolin ringtone called ?Strum,? and the 18-49 demographic considers mobile phones and texting to be vital parts of their lives way beyond basic communication. Texting decreases rapidly at 50 and older, however. Twitter was not included in the report, as figures were unavailable.

Video games, which increasingly include product placement and other advertising, are important to the 18-49 demographic, and especially to the 18-34 segment. But again, it seems unlikely to impact the bluegrass market. Don?t expect PlayStation to be releasing ?Chris Thile?s Mandolin Hero? or ?Jim Mills? Grand Theft Flathead? anytime soon.

However, given those demographics, new, young bluegrass artists like Sarah Jarosz or Sierra Hull or ?alternative? bands like Old Crow Medicine Show or the Avett Brothers will profit from focused digital mobile marketing strategies.

For those seeking the middle ground, email would seem the best, most consistent method. While other digital outlets have fluctuated wildly in popularity, email usage has remained steady at 80% of all those surveyed, regardless of age, according to Experian. As bluegrass increasingly uses email as a marketing tool, the report includes this useful finding in keeping dropouts on your mailing lists to a minimum: ?Make it easy for subscribers to change their email addresses. One of their main reasons for opting out is often to change an email address.?

Some of the findings are not surprising, to say the least. As a veteran of the hemorrhaging daily newspaper industry, I?ve watched papers disappear all over the country. According to Experian, dailies remain an important source of information for 50+, but 18-24 barely know what a newspaper is. From 18-49, the primary sources of information on entertainment are found online and on their mobile devices.

Magazines are faring much better, as 25-49 year olds still see magazines as a major source of information on entertainment. And radio remains a primary information source and entertainment outlet for that 25-49 demo, but also elicits strong interest from the 18-24 and over-50 segments.

As search engines grow in importance in accessing information on the Web, Experian reports that Google remains the dominant search engine with a 70% market share. Just what effect that has on music in general and bluegrass in particular is impossible to gage from the report, since the listing of search engine referrals by industry does not include ?entertainment,? which along with music, would involve movies as well, further muddying the data. Just where bluegrass would fall into that equation would no doubt be a much smaller segment, but would require targeted bluegrass market research.

Another finding that could be of particular interest to the bluegrass community is the shift in social networking trends, as the dramatic rise of Facebook has been mirrored by a decline in the more established MySpace. While MySpace continued to dominate the social networking market, Facebook more than doubled its traffic from February 2008 to February 2009. Even in the 35 and older demographic, Facebook use increased 11% in that same time, while MySpace declined by 2%.

Overall, Facebook increased 149% from Feb. 2008 to Feb. 2009. MySpace declined by 28% in that same period. Again, the 18-34 demographic remains the dominant demo in the social networking sphere.

The importance of mobile phones and other digital devices peaks at 89% for the 18-24 demo, but drops to 20% for the over-50 crowd.

However, the bluegrass audience remains unique in that it tends to be extremely involved and participatory. Even those older, 50-plus fans tend to be willing to try new things, whether it?s a new type of mandolin case, a new acoustic guitar pickup or a new mobile device.

They also tend to be more active and mobile than the average Baby Boomer, whether traveling to festivals like Hardly Strictly Bluegrass, special events like the Ryman Bluegrass Series or the unique experience of the Bluegrass Underground concerts at McMinnville, Tenn.?s Cumberland Caverns.

So as the trends point to a boom over the next five years for mobile marketing, social networking in general and Facebook in particular, as well as email marketing, look to enjoy continued growth. Twitter will continue to grow, although its fast pace would seem to indicate more of a bubble than an ongoing boom.

But there seems to be an untapped opportunity for mainstream marketers in the bluegrass world, which, as in most musician/creative class-driven markets, tends to be more willing to embrace innovation and new media, regardless of age, even as our musical focus remains firmly rooted in tradition. You can call that mix of old and new ?the iLonesome Sound,? but whatever you brand it, digital marketers might want to take a closer look.

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