



INTERNATIONAL BLUEGRASS MUSIC ASSOCIATION

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By Brandi Hart (2009)

Looking to finally nab that wrapped tour bus for your bluegrass band? Seeking corporate sponsorship for your event? Searching for the perfect artist to be an ambassador for your product, or for the best way to stretch your advertising dollars? If any of these goals has appeared on your to-do list, then chances are good that market research could help you get the job done.

Since 2001, IBMA has engaged the services of Experian Simmons (previously known as Simmons Market Research Bureau) to provide market research tailored to the needs of the bluegrass community. Experian Simmons provides IBMA with an annually updated, comprehensive database of consumer habits. This data allows IBMA members to learn about the consumers and markets they want to reach.

IBMA Executive Director Dan Hays notes, "People on the marketing side of bluegrass will ask themselves, "Who am I talking to out there? I need to understand who my audience is so that I can know best how to appeal to them.?"

OK, you may be saying to yourself, I know my audience. Perhaps you've even attended an IBMA seminar on the Simmons research or culled through its annual summary of market data. Alternatively, you may have been in the business of bluegrass so long that you're familiar with your core customer base.

If you know your audience and would like to partner with another company to grow your business, your next step is to look for a partner that fits. The award-winning Grascals landed a high-profile sponsorship deal with Mayberry's Finest Brand Foods which lasted nearly two years. When asked for advice on finding the right partner company, The Grascals' manager Nick Pellegrino remarks, "You've got to look at what it is that a company is trying to sell, and determine whether it goes along with what you believe in and what you use." Pellegrino adds, "There's an integrity issue there, as

well. The Grascals probably wouldn't have taken a sponsorship from a cigarette company because no one in the band smokes. The band needed to find something that made sense, but at the same time maintained the integrity of the brand."

Note Pellegrino's use of the word "brand" to describe one of our genre's most popular acts. Whether you're a manufacturer, a promoter, an artist or a member of the media, it's important to think of your company as a brand. Ask yourself: Are there ways to build my

brand while fulfilling the needs of a company who can help me grow? Are there idealistic, thematic or goal-related ties to other companies out there which could lead to a mutually beneficial relationship?

Once you've identified the needs that your brand can fulfill for another company, you must demonstrate those needs in a compelling way. "Most corporations are going to tell you that the numbers don't justify the investment," says Pellegrino. "You have to be able to justify why it makes sense for them to do a sponsorship with you. Are you reaching a demographic that they need or that they already exist in? The compensation for them has got to be substantial if you're asking them to write you a check."

This is where market research data comes in handy. The Experian Simmons data empowers the bluegrass community to say to a potential sponsor, "We are your customers," or "We could be your customers?" and to back up that statement with compelling statistics.

Hays explains, "One of the things that the data will portray is what we call variants from the norm. Either we will have a higher proclivity to do something or a lower proclivity to do something. We're 92% more likely to use Martha White flour than the average American. That's a high variance, based on their brand's long association and support of the music. That makes a difference going into someone like Martha White to make a presentation, and being able to say, "We are your audience." "

However, the data is a double-edged sword. "From the opposite perspective," Hays explains, "you could go into another flour company and say, "We are flour users; we're just using another brand.?" In other words, you're demonstrating an untapped market.

To create the perfect pitch for a partnership, your best bet is to get specific. "It's a lot easier to for me to help people if they come to me with specific questions," notes IBMA Administrative Assistant Jess Norburg. Jess is IBMA's first point of contact for all data-related questions.

"If people call up and just say, "Send me the Simmons data," I can send them some general figures for the year; however, I can be a lot more helpful to them if they can ask me detailed questions." In other words, if you'd like to partner with a restaurant chain, you should be prepared to ask Jess some pointed questions about the eating and lifestyle habits of bluegrass listeners: which chains they're likelier to patronize, how often they eat out each week, and whether they're likelier to choose a sit-down restaurant over fast food.

If your company's goal is to get the most bang for your advertising buck, Hays notes that the Simmons data can also prove useful: "Even if you have what a consumer wants," says Hays, "you have to know how to reach them. You may have the best product, but if you're not reaching the consumer in a way that matters to them, then you're just not maximizing what you can do with your project."

Surprisingly, few within the bluegrass community are exploring the Simmons research. Norburg notes that she more often hears from corporations who see our community as an untapped market, rather than from community members themselves. Let's make sure that road goes both ways: By growing our brands individually, we grow bluegrass collectively. In other words, everybody wins.

For more information on using the Experian Simmons data for your next project, contact Jess Norburg at 1-888-438-4262 or at jess@ibma.org [2].

Brandi Hart is the lead singer and a principal songwriter/co-founder of The Dixie Bee-Liners. The Bee-Liners? new CD, Susanville, will be released November 3, 2009 on Pinecastle Records.

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