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## [Branding and Bluegrass Music](#) <sup>[1]</sup>

by Brandi Hart

They say necessity is the mother of invention ? or reinvention.

As a bluegrass artist, I've got to agree. By necessity, I've reinvented myself any number of times, and I imagine that many folks in the bluegrass community are like me: We've become our own webmasters, managers, publicists, administrators, graphic designers, stylists and armchair marketing gurus. (Oh, and somewhere in there, we still make time to play music?.)

Recently I found myself in a Nashville conference room, among 25 like-minded people. For three days of intensive workshops, we all scribbled notes while panelists discussed the state of the music industry ?and bluegrass music, in particular. The program, known as Leadership Bluegrass, tackled the music business from every possible angle. But most of what was covered can be summed up in one word: reinvention.

The music industry is reinventing itself right under our noses. The digital revolution in the media is presenting new technology at a dizzying pace: Apps. Blogs. Vlogs. Clouds. Feeds. Podcasts. Widgets. If you don't know what these words mean, chances are good that you'll find out soon.

Along with the rest of the music industry, our bluegrass community is being forced to take a hard look at how we promote (or fail to promote) ourselves in this 21st century marketplace. Whether we're artists, presenters, labels, agents, columnists or DJ's, we're all learning that we must adapt to our changing environment ? or risk being left behind. Even those of us who choose to ignore the digital revolution are affected by it, whether we realize it or not.

So what does it all mean? How does all this reinvention affect the bluegrass industry?

The short answer is this: It affects us deeply. In a rapidly moving constellation of new media outlets, we're beginning to see ourselves not just as artists or enthusiasts, but also as businesspeople. We're discovering that our unique musical heritage presents an opportunity to grow our audience through branding. In a marketplace full of choices, our authenticity gives us an advantage. It makes us special.

You may be asking yourself, what exactly is a brand, anyway? Not long ago, I might have defined a brand as a simple message, clearly communicated to a targeted group of people. That message could come in the form of a logo, an album title or a festival poster. It could be transmitted in the form of a blog or a podcast. I might have also suggested that successful branding manages to unify all the separate messages we send into one easy-to-understand sound byte: ?Sweet-pick'd for freshness? or ?good to the last drop.?

However, experts today are changing the way we think of brands. In his book, *Buyology: Truth and Lies About Why We Buy*, author Martin Lindstrom maintains that brand images are less tangible than we have suspected. And he should know. He claims to have conducted the largest neuromarketing study in history.

Lindstrom explains: "[When] we make decisions about what to buy, our brain summons and scans an incredible amount of memories, facts and emotions and squeezes them into a rapid response a shortcut of sorts that allows you to travel from A to Z in a couple of seconds, and that dictates what you put inside your shopping cart."

Lindstrom goes on to cite a recent German study, which found that "over 50% of all purchasing decisions by shoppers are made spontaneously" and therefore unconsciously "at the point of sale."

To this armchair guru, this translates as a matter of intangibles. As an artist, my brand image is ultimately the sum of the intangible experiences consumers have with my music. It's the smell of the grass, barbecue and suntan lotion when a fan hears us perform at a festival. It's the feeling of connection she gets from speaking to us at the product table. It's the way she chuckles when she reads our blogs or our liner notes.

I've stopped asking myself, "What is my brand image?" Instead, I'm asking different questions:

- What tangible and intangible messages am I sending to my customers?
- Who is receiving these messages?
- Are they mixed messages, or are they harmonious?
- When I answer these questions frankly, I begin to see my brand from the consumer's point of view. Only then can I start to be objective about the strengths and weaknesses of my marketing choices.
- Armed with these answers, the blogs and vlogs and widgets suddenly seem less intimidating. I can approach the new media with more realistic paradigm. I can pick and choose which media outlets my listeners are most likely to use, and I can feel confident about the messages I am sending.
- For my friends in bluegrass who may raise an eyebrow at the notion of bluegrass as a branded commodity, I'd like to propose that this is a good thing. I believe that as we learn to express ourselves better to the outside world, we dispel negative stereotypes and bring our music to a wider audience. By marketing our music more effectively, we don't change what the music essentially is. We merely change how it is perceived by the world around us.

As torch-bearers for a form of traditional American music, we have grown accustomed to looking backward. We have been looking to the past for so long that it can feel jarring (and downright scary) to think of "the future of bluegrass music." But if we are committed to keeping bluegrass alive and growing, we must become adept marketers of our own heritage — past, present, and future. This means, at the very least, cultivating a peaceful coexistence of traditional and contemporary bluegrass styles.

However, I'd suggest going one step further: Let's leave behind the comfort zone of our dusty, old 20th century marketing efforts. In the majority of cases, those old strategies allow

for only a moderate level of success, anyway.

Let's shatter our self-imposed glass ceiling and reach out to new audiences with new perspectives. Not all of our traditions need reinvention, but our business models surely do.

Brandi Hart is singer, songwriter, and guitarist with The Dixie Bee-Liners. The band's newest CD, Susanville, will be released on Pinecastle Records the fall of 2009.

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