Selling The Song, Or The Product?

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Seventeen years ago, the rap duo Run-D.M.C. recorded a gushing tribute to Adidas sneakers because, Run once explained, "we just liked them."

Silly artists.

Today, a growing number of singers wouldn't think of mentioning a shoe company - or any other brand - without a sure plan to cash in on it. And a handful of companies have sprung up to help exploit the fuzzy line between music and marketing, a line that is blurring far beyond traditional endorsement contracts or concert sponsorships.

"These days, we ensure artists get paid for the products they sing about," said Jameel Spencer, chief marketing officer of Bad Boy Entertainment, a record label owned by Sean "P. Diddy" Combs. "They're really much more entrepreneurial."

Spencer, who is also president of Combs' Blue Flame Marketing and Advertising, says part of his job is figuring out what products his artists like, and then hitting up those companies for marketing deals tied to the music.

In an upcoming music video, for example, the rap singer Loon carries a Kyocera cellphone - but hey, only because he just loves the thing, not because the company wrote a fat check.

"It's gotta be natural. It can't just be about the money," Spencer says. "The home run situation is when an artist has a real affinity for the brand and creates a relationship that's going to be mutually beneficial because they really, really honestly organically like the brand."

Spencer, an affable businessman with infectious energy, calls it a "win-win for everyone."

I'm not so sure.

It's amazing how a check with a whole lotta zeroes can make someone really, really honestly organically like a brand. And I see a dangerously short hop to a day when song lyrics and music videos become little more than advertisements for corporate sponsors.

It's a slippery slope, but in 2003, the industry has trouble seeing beyond the dollar signs. Sales of CDs, cassettes and records have dropped more than 20 percent in the last two years.

That translates to a $1.75 billion hit for the record labels, which has drained marketing and music-video budgets.

"The recording industry's in absolute turmoil right now," said Mark Humphrey, managing director of BandAD (www.bandad.net), a Los Angeles company that links musicians and advertisers.

"Five years ago, it wasn't nearly so bad. Kids were buying records and everything was fine," Humphrey said. "But now, due to piracy, marketing dollars are not there, so labels have to link up with third-party sponsorship in order to market their act."
It's as simple as that."

It's the reason rappers Ms. Jade and Timbaland are rumbling down the street in Hummer H2s in the music video for Ms. Jade's song "Ching Ching." Along with the trucks came a $300,000 check to cover most of the video's production costs. In addition to the product placement, the Hummer is promoted on Ms. Jade's website.

Win-win? Not to MTV, the powerful music-video channel, which forbids product placements, and was never told about the H2 deal.

It's not uncommon. With product placements so profitable, the name of the game for record labels is fooling MTV into airing a product shot. Watch blues singer Tweet's video for "Call Me," and you'll notice she spends an awful lot of time caressing a Motorola phone - part of a deal with Verizon Wireless that MTV never caught.

"As it stands now, you don't alert MTV," Humphrey said. "You're smart enough with your production design and your placement and you slide it by because MTV just simply won't play it if you make them aware of it. Then you've made a bloody video and pissed off a sponsor, and nothing's getting aired."

Humphrey thinks he has a better way. He worked with American Express for a promotion built on Sheryl Crow's music video "Soak up the Sun."

Amex helped foot the bill for the video, then shot extra footage on location for use in a television commercial that features the song.

The charge card never appears in the music video - so MTV can't complain. But the commercial mirrors the video, and American Express is counting on consumers to think about the card when they watch the real deal on MTV or hear the song.

"So the association was made without the gratuitous placement, which is wonderful," Humphrey said.

Humphrey says he's sensitive to questions of artistic integrity, but said the scramble for marketing dollars means there's no turning back on the growing ties between musicians and corporations.

"The truth of the matter is, this is inevitable. It's absolutely inevitable. The lines are going to get so blurry," he said. "I think 10 years from now, to be honest, there is no such word as 'music video,' 'commercial' or 'feature film.' Ten years from now, we're looking at content where everything merges, everything becomes one, in order to offset costs and make things financially and economically viable."

For centuries, music has bent to commercial pressures, and artists have long cashed in on the value of their image in the marketplace. (Even Run-D.M.C. eventually scored a sneaker deal, but only because their business-savvy manager contacted Adidas long after the song was written.)

But Humphrey's vision of the music's future has me longing for the past.

In 1988, Neil Young wrote "This Note's for You," a spoof of commercialism in music.

Ain't singin' for Pepsi.

Ain't singin' for Coke.

I don't sing for nobody.

Makes me look like a joke.

It's an anachronism today, but that song sounds pretty good to me.

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