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Take note of sonic branding.

by Debra Blundell.

Why is it we can remember the theme tune to obscure TV shows or ads we watched as children yet many of us struggle to remember what day of the week it is? And why does that irritating ring tone you heard on the train this morning play over and over again in your head until it drives you crazy? The answer lies in the incredibly strong connection between sound and memory. Sound is one of the most evocative senses. It exploits emotions and can take us right back to a distant event or place, or instantly translate in our brains to a feeling or a mood.

This is one of the main reasons that sound is creating such a buzz in marketing circles of late - but it's not the only reason. Sound is extremely portable. You can listen to music wherever you are and whatever you're doing, which means its reach goes far beyond that of a visual logo. Sound - or sonic branding as it has become known - is an increasingly valuable tool in establishing your brand identity.

The most instantly visible representation of any brand is its logo. But a logo has limits, and can only be used where sight is involved: in print, on packaging, on TV and outdoors. Sound, however, can reach the parts that other types of sensory branding cannot reach, delivering different messages while still maintaining brand consistency.

Your company's hold music, for instance, is an important and often overlooked opportunity to convey your brand personality at a time when visual contact isn't possible. Sonic branding is also great for reinforcing visual messages. A presentation backed up with on-brand music will have far more impact than words and pictures alone. Similarly, shows, seminars, websites and multimedia collateral like CDs and DVDs are all opportunities to reinforce your brand musically.

Much of what we now know as sonic branding isn't new. It's just that we now have a name for it and a recognition of its power. Whether you're commissioning original music for a TV or radio advertisement, licensing music to use on a website or CD, choosing suitable voice-over talent or selecting your hold music, you are subconsciously making a brand statement. And no company wants to be associated with a version of Greensleeves that sounds like it's being played on the stylophone!

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It's not just about choosing an audio signature. You need to make sure you are using the right sounds, and using them consistently at all customer touch points. Get your agency involved in this. They can advise on what type of sounds will work with your visual identity and tone of voice, and offer suggestions of where and how you can incorporate sonic branding into your marketing activity. To get you started, here are a few examples of the different forms sonic branding can take and how some well known brands have used them to their advantage:

Sonic logos. With just a few notes, you know a computer has 'Intel inside' without ever mentioning the name.

Hold music. Relaxing, non-repetitive music will make that wait more bearable. There's a good reason why Direct Line doesn't use its audio signature when you call up!

Mobile phone ringtones. Nokia invented the customised ringtones that spread like wildfire (just think of the Crazy Frog) and have spurred a major industry. Do like Easyjet and turn their popularity to your advantage by creating a corporate ringtone for staff or customers to use on their phones.

Musical signatures. Associating a sound with an action can have a powerful effect. The Microsoft Windows 95 start-up sound (Ta da!) was composed by Brian Eno, who was briefed to create something inspiring, universal, optimistic, futuristic, sentimental and emotional.

Background music. Starbucks has had a partnership with Hear Music since 1999 to produce its particular brand of soothing jazz, designed to make you want to linger over a second latte. MacDonaldis actually speeds up music at lunchtimes to increase customer turnaround.

In-store music. NikeTown's high energy, vibrant, uplifting sound track helps attract young urban customers, while at Border Books, the slow, relaxed sounds are designed to encourage leisurely browsing.

Product design. BMW, Bentley and Ford have all done research into the sound of a car door closing to get the optimum sound that customers find recognisable and reassuring. Harley Davidson has trademarked the distinctive roar of its motorcycle engines as they create the tough, wild and free identity of its bikes. In this digital age, 'mechanical' sounds are often added to products - the 'click' on a digital camera or the 'ching' of a cash pay-out on new coinless slot machines.

You might not be about to design a new car, but there are simple and effective ways to introduce elements of sonic branding into every business: hold music, ads, corporate presentations, websites - the list goes on. The trick is to stop just thinking about what your business looks like, but ask yourself what it sounds like too.

If you would like to discuss sonic branding in greater detail, contact Gary Clark at gc@indigocreative.co.uk