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Retailers Fine-Tune Store Music to Reflect Brand, Make You Want to Shop

Playlists Go Mobile, Bringing Brands Into Consumers' Lives Outside the Store

By RAY A. SMITH

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Levi's and PlayNetwork compiled songs by groundbreaking artists to communicate authenticity. *Levi's*

It is the factor that can keep shoppers happily browsing in the store for hours—or drive them out the door in a huff.

Retailers are fine-tuning their stores' playlists as they wake up to the power of music to communicate a brand message and put shoppers in the mood to spend. One shopper's favorite song can make another shopper cringe.

Big chains turn to specialists like Mood Media, based in Austin, Texas, and PlayNetwork, in Redmond, Wash., to design store playlists that match the values and design aesthetic of the brand and the lifestyle of its shoppers. Retailers might offer specific descriptions of their core customers and suggest specific artists and songs.

Levi Strauss has been working with PlayNetwork to develop a playlist of songs and artists who broke new musical ground to define what the brand calls its "pioneering spirit" across 1,500 of its stores world-wide.



Afrobeat icon Fela Kuti is among artists whose songs are compiled. *Redferns*

TV commercials during the 1980s had associated Levi's with iconic songs like "Stand By Me" by Ben E. King and Percy Sledge's "When a Man Loves a Woman." The brand was "ready to reclaim that place in the market," said Chad Hinson, Levi's senior director of global brand creative.

Macy's, the department store giant, is developing shopping soundtracks for shoppers in their teens and 20s. It has worked with Clear Channel on "mstyleradio," an in-store radio station featuring real DJs that plays in its Young Men's and Juniors' departments, which it has branded "mstylelab." "We tend to put the volume up a little further there," said Martine Reardon, Macy's chief marketing officer. "That's what that customer likes and expects."

Thanks to digital technology, Macy's and other retailers can readily switch songs in and out in real time, avoiding the fatigue that can occur, especially during the holiday season, when shoppers and employees hear the same tracks over and over again.



London-based Thomas Pink plays music mostly by British artists, including singer-songwriter Natasha Khan, shown, also known as Bat for Lashes. Associated Press (

Many stores start sprinkling holiday music into their mix starting in late November. They slowly increase the frequency, aware that playing too much "Jingle Bells" too soon can prompt a backlash.

At Thomas Pink, the London-based men's-specialty store, one in six songs is a Christmas song in late November. By early December, it's one in four, and by Dec. 25 it's about one in three, says the retailer's creative director, Florence Torrens. The retailer's usual mix features classic and current British artists, whether the Who, David Bowie or singer-songwriter Bat for Lashes. "It's a mixed bag, but the overriding DNA of the music is that it is British," Ms. Torrens said.

Some of Urban Outfitters' playlists, filled with obscure, indie artists, are available on online platforms like Spotify and SoundCloud. Macy's mstyleradio is available on Clear Channel's iHeartRadio mobile and online platforms.

A retailer looking to fill its stores with music from, say, an employee's iPod or CD collection must first obtain licensing rights. Mood Media, PlayNetwork and other in-store music providers pay annual license fees to the American Society of Composers, Authors and Publishers and other organizations representing composers in exchange for the rights to program any music in the organization's library. The organization in turn pays royalties to the songwriters.

Abercrombie & Fitch, the chain known for dim lighting, strong fragrance and loud, throbbing music, develops its playlists in-house and makes them available on an app.

"We feel our kid is very mobile," said Craig Brommers, senior vice president of marketing. The app helps make the music "part of their lives outside of the store."

Mood Media can program particular types of music depending on the time of day, which it calls "day parting," said Ken Eissing, chief operating officer for North America.

Gap aims to capture "optimism, democracy and individualism," said Tricia Nichols, senior director of global consumer engagement and partnerships. Its playlists include Rihanna and U.S. indie band Fun.

Shopping to music prompts the release of dopamine, delivers a sense of pleasure and helps focus attention, said Daniel J. Levitin, a professor of psychology and behavioral neuroscience who runs the Laboratory for Music Cognition, Perception and Expertise at McGill University, Montreal. "This could lead to putting people in a generous mood," he said.

Levi's wanted music that would weave the brand's cowboy and mining history into its stores. But with its consumers ranging across a wide age, a question arose: Which music embodies a "pioneering spirit" both for teens and for people who have been buying Levi's for 50 years?

PlayNetwork took a "deep dive" into the brand, its culture and store design, said John Crooke, PlayNetwork's vice president of global brand development. Levi's identified songs it felt represented its values. The eclectic playlists they rolled out to stores in July feature Otis Redding, Lou Reed, 1940s big band music, blues songs and 2013 releases. "It's about songs that are timeless," Mr. Hinson said. "Hopefully people will hear that authenticity."

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A specialty store of Thomas Pink Thomas Pink



The Gap aims to invoke feelings of optimism, individualism and democracy in its stores. Bloomberg

