

## Indie rockers tell retailers: It's OK, I'm with the brand

By JAMES COVERT

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Forget the clubs downtown -- if you want to check out a cool band, head to your favorite clothing shop.

That, at least, is the kind of thing fans can expect as rock acts search for fresh ways to make money in the age of free music downloads.

Dress Barn's [Maurices](#) chain -- a 700-store apparel outlet that caters to girls in small towns -- is staging a girl-band contest whose winner will perform a show at their hometown shop alongside Sick of Sarah, a Minneapolis-based, all-female indie group that has gained a nationwide following.

"This is a really cool opportunity for us," said Sick of Sarah bassist Jamie Holm, noting that the band's upcoming album is already being piped into the retailer's stores. "There's a lot of people who are going to stumble across our music just because they came into the store."

Apart from borrowing the rock group's cachet to increase its own cool factor, Dress Barn executives in its Suffern, NY headquarters are asking very little from Sick of Sarah for the effort.

That's a big switch from the typical artist's deal being offered by a record label, which in exchange for producing and distributing an album, demands the lion's share of royalties and returns from tours, publishing, music and merchandise sales.

As the record industry continues its tailspin, retailers and consumer brands are stepping in. Moving beyond simply playing music in their stores, merchants are beginning to stage concerts and even help cutting-edge rock bands produce music and videos for little more than a song.

One firm that's brokering such deals is [PlayNetwork](#), a longtime provider of piped-in music for retailers. In addition to the Maurices contest, PlayNetwork has begun to produce music and videos for youth-focused retail brands such as action sports and surf-and-skate gear, says marketing exec Brian Hirsh.

"We're building two soundstages, so bands can come in and play, and we can record them and shoot them," Hirsh told The Post. Recently, the firm shot a mini-documentary about the making of a Weezer video, which will be broadcast exclusively at the stores and Web sites of the firm's retail clients.

If all of this sounds like selling out to die-hard rock-and-rollers, the younger generation doesn't see it that way, according to Panos Panay, founder of [Sonicbids](#), an online booking service for bands and music promoters. While club dates have long been the site's bread and butter, a recent survey by the firm found that aspiring rock stars were far more interested in landing deals with consumer brands.

Last year, Sonicbids helped Gap organize 765 live performances by local acts at stores across the country to celebrate its 40th anniversary. Now, the Boston-based firm is assisting an online battle of the bands for Diesel jeans.

"These consumer brands are, in many ways, the new indie labels," Panay says. "It remains to be seen if they're going to start acting like labels, asking artists for rights and their own cut."

For the time being, Sick of Sarah is upbeat about the new ties between music and clothing.

"Everyone wants to dress like their idols -- people see an artist onstage and they're rocking the skinny jeans and the hip t-shirts," says lead singer and guitarist Abisha Uhl. "I'm not selling out -- I'm pretty much cashing in."

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