

MARKET YOUR WORK LIKE A PR PRO

Tips for the Independent Musician

.....
by Jennifer Billock

////////////////////////////////////
Independent online music promotion is no small undertaking. Most of the websites dedicated to promotions sound great but in the long run they never get an artist anywhere. The good news? Some of them can. And with the right website choices and determination in your arsenal, your music can go far.

SELF-PROMOTION

“It’s very difficult to sell music these days, period,” says Jimmy Ether, musician and chief engineer at Jimmy Ether Mastering and Recording. “No service, online or off, is going to sell your music simply by your use of them. You have to do all the hard work of building a following and exciting your base of listeners. What services can do is provide you a simple, inexpensive and usable place to point your following for various purposes.”

Bandcamp.com is the best place to start. It’s free for an artist to create a profile, and flexible graphics allow musicians to practically mirror their website. Bandcamp will also provide you with a digital storefront to sell your music. And once you’ve uploaded your album, coded players make it easy to share your songs on many social networking sites. **NoiseTrade.com** works on the same principles as Bandcamp, and the two of them together can prove invaluable for marketing and discovery.

“I’ve gained quite a lot of new fans through these sites,” says Milwaukee-based musician Kyle Gray Young. “I’ve found that there are a lot of people out there who routinely look for new indie artists on these sites and will download any new albums that spark their interest.”

Once you’ve got your band set up with a profile, hit the marketing angle. Starting a **Facebook** fan page is PR 101 nowadays, and it is vital for promoting yourself with interactive status updates and **YouTube** videos.

“Any musician that doesn’t have a YouTube channel is not promoting themselves properly,” says Los Angeles-based musician Circe Link. “Even if they don’t have video content, they could do a lyric video, which is a static image with lyrics scrolling by on the screen. [YouTube is] the number one music discovery source that I know of today. If you’re not taking the time to develop a YouTube presence, then you’re missing a huge part of marketing.”

A good website and newsletter are also essential tools for developing and promoting your music and brand. **WordPress.com**, although typically known as a blogging platform, offers comprehensive website hosting services complete with customizable design templates and built-in site traffic analytics, which detail user information down to gender and location for each page view. You can use that information to tailor your newsletter to a particular audience.

MailChimp.com allows users to customize email campaigns with photo, video, and text integration while still maintaining a streamlined image that matches your website brand. Email newsletters come out looking professional and high quality.

“When you’re sending something out, I think the difference between someone’s materials looking amateur and someone’s materials looking professional is the amount of clutter and the color selection,” Link says. “You can tell when someone sends you something with a bunch of yellow highlighting all over it that you’re going to throw it away because it looks like spam.”

Email campaigns through MailChimp can be separated into profiles as well, so fans at a gig that sign up for your newsletter can receive a custom mailing specific to their location—or any other profile you’d like to target.

ALBUM PROMOTION

Still, just getting your band name out there isn’t enough. People need to hear your music and should have every opportunity to listen. Luckily, the days of hawking CDs on the sidewalk are over. It’s easier than ever to distribute your album to the vast public—and you don’t even have to take the reins yourself.

Link, Young, and Ether all use **CDBaby** and **Tunecore** to handle digital distribution of their music. The services send songs on your behalf to iTunes, Amazon, Spotify, and many other major online retailers. CDBaby also provides distribution services for physical CDs when necessary—but try to avoid having CDs made unless it’s absolutely critical. Ether uses the website **Kunaki.com** to produce quality CD short runs, about 10 discs at a time, and the company will ship the CDs to CDBaby or Amazon so you don’t have to.

“CD sales are awful these days,” Ether says. “Unless you are on a national tour opening for a well-known band, do not under any circumstances do large-run traditional compact disc replication. They will end up in a closet.”

APP-LY YOURSELF

Opportunities to further your career as a musician flood the digital marketplace. Here are the top five apps to simplify recording, distributing, and selling your music.

GarageBand—This is the ultimate one-stop app for any musician, aspiring or experienced. Create music with any of the included instruments, or plug your own into the device and record what you play. Get together with your band and have a jam session on multiple devices. Then use the eight-track recording studio to perfect your music. Upload it to iTunes, email the file, or even make your own ringtone. Platform: Apple.

iMovie—The movie making tools in iMovie allow you to record and design complex music videos and upload them for your Facebook and YouTube followers. And you can record with anyone, anywhere. Device sharing allows long-distance virtual collaborations with musicians across the world. Platform: Apple.

Propellerhead Figure—Create digital music tracks with a synth and a drum machine. Then upload right to your SoundCloud page from the app. Platform: Apple.

MailChimp—Forget easy-to-lose email sign-up sheets and add fans to your mailing list right from your gigs with the MailChimp app. You can also check your campaign stats and demographics. Platform: Android, Apple.

WordPress—Manage your website from anywhere with the companion app to the popular blogging and website platform. Add videos, add photos, and make updates to your site or your blog, all from your phone. Platform: Android, Apple.

BUYER BEWARE

Today’s digital world can certainly provide an exhausting amount of opportunities for musicians to promote their craft, but with the good comes the bad. The amount of scams has skyrocketed past the legitimate sites as people scramble to capitalize on the music industry’s size and presence. Websites and companies asking for money up front should generally be avoided. Always be sure to thoroughly research every website before signing up—although that still may not disclose hidden costs.

For example, Young once spent four hours investigating a supposedly free new music promotion and film placement company that followed him on Twitter, and he even went through the extensive application process, only to get smacked with a \$400 membership

fee on the final page. The company not only established itself as a liar—every webpage said the service was free—but also jeopardized its credibility.

“Back in the day, someone who demanded money in exchange for listening to your music was considered a shark,” Young says. “These days, it seems to be an almost legitimate business. Be cautious of any sites that promise you success for a fee. There’s no such thing as guaranteed success. No amount of money you can spend will make anything certain in this business.”

Thinking of your music career as a business will go a long way in protecting you from money-pit sites and scams. Protect your money and keep track of your income and expenses. Legitimate services for musicians will work on sales and licensing commissions. If a service costs more than you expect to make from using it, look elsewhere.

“Musicians should build their career just as someone would build a small niche business,” Ether says. “Always ask yourself what you realistically have to gain and lose from any service with a focus on the financial outcome. If the sales income doesn’t at least balance the cost, there is probably a better place you could focus that money.”

.....
Jennifer Billock is a writer, editor, and layout designer based in the Chicago/Milwaukee area. Her work has appeared in publications including *World Travel Buzz*, *Tea Magazine*, *Taste of Home Magazine*, *Broughton Quarterly*, *Healthy Cooking Magazine*, *The Ambler*, and *The Real Chicago Magazine*. Her book, *Images of America: Keweenaw County* will be released in March 2014.
.....