

Jingle Bells (the business of writing jingles)

One of my readers runs a small recording studio in California, and writes songs to boot. Some years ago, he started getting requests from local traders to pen jingles for them - sometimes for radio advertisements, but more often than not simply for playing over the sound systems in the store in question. What started as a once-in-a-season opportunity has now become a full-time business, and nowadays he finds himself writing more jingles and fewer songs.

He charges \$1,500 per tune, with a royalty to be agreed on for radio or television usage, which strikes us as a very low rate indeed, given that not only does he write the tune, and fit the lyrics to it, but he also performs the jingle, recording it in his own studio. At that price, he has no shortage of takers, which is hardly surprising given the prices quoted by the big agencies, and of course, he has the advantage of being in a position to deal face-to-face with both the local trader and the local radio station to make sure that both are happy with the finished product. As a result, the radio outlets often recommend his services to other retailers, while some of his earlier one-store clients have grown, now operating several shops, each with their own jingles.

One of the advertising agencies has even started recommending his service to the local shop owner who drops by hoping to get Elvis Presley performing "Blue Suede Shoes" with lyrics suitably altered to accommodate his footwear business, only to find that the King is dead, but that even if he were not, he would be looking at \$250,000 before Elvis would even open his mouth for him, or the agency open their doors. So he takes the advice given, and sets his sights a little lower. Some day, of course, that client will get too big for the little service, and start thinking again of spending that \$250,000 - in which case, he will go back to the agency who gave him the lead in the first place, but meanwhile, everybody is happy.

Now there is a moral to all this. You probably pen the occasional jingle, but do not know how to proceed beyond that. Perhaps you write something for IBM, or Coca-Cola, or Barclays, not realising that those companies are unlikely to pay too much attention to the work of a newcomer, when you should be listening to local radio, picking up on a non-jingle ad for a local business, and then putting that ad to music. Once you have the demo ready - take it along to the owner, and play it for him. As long as it has a catchy tune, and his name is prominently featured in that tune, you will find that he is fascinated by the whole idea. And once you're in - you can milk it for all you're worth. He should have a general jingle - perhaps a Christmas one, not to mention one for the January sales, Easter, Summer, and Autumn. And, of course, one to advertise special lines and special promotions. The important thing is - write the jingle first.

Do not just go in offering to write one - arrive with it under your arm, ready to go. The gimmick of somebody coming in the door with the tune in hand works wonders, and if you have managed to fit a catchy tune around the client's sales message, then you will be well on your way. Remember, with this type of advertising - the client is very much motivated not so much by an increase in sales (which is what should really happen), but by one of his customers (or rivals) mentioning that they have just heard the jingle - so catchiness is all important. And the price? Well, whatever the market will bear may sound a little bit harsh, but do not under-price yourself. And remember, you are not confined to your own area - as long as you can pick up a radio station, you can get leads - but not forgetting that whereas the local Boots or HMV store is not a potential client (their London head office will probably be calling the shots there), but the family butcher may very well be.

I had never written a commercial in my life when a business friend of mine asked how much would it cost to use a sixties hit song to advertise his business? I hadn't a clue, but given that our

city had fewer than 100,000 inhabitants, and he had only one store, I thought that a few hundred dollars would cover the use of the song. And could I re-write the lyrics to include references to his shoe store, and record the entire package for a radio ad? Of course I could - for \$500 I could do anything in those days. Anyway, I went ahead and within a few days, had laid down a very cool 30 second snatch of the song, with a lead vocal which sounded passably close to the original hit recording.

And then, disaster. We were not, it seems, talking a few hundred dollars for the rights to use the original song - we were talking telephone numbers, and I could see my \$500 going up in smoke before my very eyes, which considering I had the job more or less done, was not a pleasing prospect. So I took a chance. Would he pay if I wrote a song specially for him, which sounded close enough to the original sound, without getting us all done for plagiarism? We agreed a figure. I went back to the drawing board, and wrote my first commercial, not because I wanted to, but because I had mentally spent that \$500 I had yet to get. He paid up - it got broadcast, and I got into penning the occasional jingle.

Actually, several readers do nothing except radio jingles. They make an excellent full-time living without moving outside their home towns. And they still write songs - thus keeping their hands in while earning their daily bread in the music biz. Actually, any writer can make a living writing jingles for radio and TV ads without moving to New York or London. He can also write themes for TV shows, and minor movies, not forgetting those hardy people who pen the background music used in computer games, on internet sites, in restaurants and shops. All are ready markets - all can be broken into - and all are very lucrative, if you know what you're doing. So - how do you break into the business?

First off, you have to be able to record your own jingles, and secondly, you have to know your market. And that market? Well, jingles can be sold to advertising agencies representing advertisers. They can be sold to those radio stations and TV stations who prepare packages in-house for their advertisers. And finally, they can be sold to advertisers directly - in other words, those who do not use agencies. For the first two - you need some sort of track record, and samples of your broadcast work, so if you have neither, the third way is the best way - direct to the client himself. And how do you find the client? Well, the best method is to turn on your local radio station, and listen to the ads which are voice only, with no jingle. Then, using the ad copy contained in the voice-only ad, write and record a demo jingle suitable for the market. It is important, of course, that you understand the client, and the client's market. An upmarket jewellery shop will not want something that sounds like Def Leppard - a night club will not want your pastiche of "Theme from the Titanic".

Remember to do a couple of different versions. Many clients may not want just a full sung jingle - most will also want a top and tail (the sung jingle at the start and end with an instrumental break in the middle for a voice-over), and may need different lengths (15 seconds, 30 seconds, and 60 seconds are the most common). Then, cut it on a CD, and drop in to have a chat with your potential client. No matter how busy he is - he will see you, but remember to take a portable CD player with you!

Point out that you can obtain a voice-over artist for the top and tail ads (your local radio talent will be happy to oblige for a fee) or if he prefers, he might like to do this voice-over himself. (Most clients love to hear their own voice on their ads). Leave the CD with him - he will want to play it for his wife, his mother-in-law, the man in the pub, and anybody else who will listen, and if you have done the job properly, you will get the contract. A few deals later, and you will have a track record, and enough samples for a demo to send around the agencies.

However, before making your first sortie, listen carefully to what is already there. Start by taping the existing ads on your local radio station. After a month or two, you will have built up a collection of ad-breaks, and you can now divide this tape into two sections - jingles (which are not likely to be of any interest to you from a sales point of view), and non-jingles (which will comprise your potential market). The first group - the jingles - will show you what is out there already and fix the length of the average ad break. The second group, the non-jingle ads, will be your future clients.

Now some in this group will have been made by ad agencies on behalf of the local business, so you may be wasting your time approaching those firms, although not always. Many will be very surprised to have you walk in the door, pointing out that you can do a jingle for their firm for X Pounds - particularly since their ad agency has told them that it is too expensive to even contemplate such an extravagance. So what do you look for?

First off, you should assemble a list of local companies who are advertising their businesses without a sung jingle. In some cases, these will be plain spoken ads - in other cases, there will be a voice over background music. Not all of these firms are necessarily in the market for a sung jingle but many will be, and most will probably be placing their ads directly through the local radio station without recourse to an advertising agency. Accordingly, when you go to speak to the boss of the local store - you will be speaking to the man who can make the decisions.

Having assembled your list of firms, you should choose one or two for your first attempt. Listen carefully to the existing ad. How long is it? If it is just 15 seconds of spoken text, you may think your effort will probably have to be 30 seconds in length - to allow for the full text, and the sung jingle. This may put a client off. He will now have to book much longer slots than heretofore (although the extra length is not necessarily proportionately more expensive). In fact, you may find that the existing 15 second spoken ad is padded (the message could probably have been told in 7 or 8 seconds, but the minimum slot on that station may well be 15 seconds). If so, you can edit the text, and include a jingle within the 15 second limit anyway. Remember, timing is important so do a fade-out ending for your basic take rather than an exact 15 second full-stop bed, and then edit the final master to exactly the length required.

Although the jingle is what you will be worried about, it is the text with which the customer is most concerned, so make sure that your sung jingle does not overwhelm the message. Actually, the sung jingle need only comprise a few words - perhaps a slogan. (One of the first ones I did was for a video library called Delight Videos, and having put down a twelve second bed to allow details of this week's new videos, I ended with a simple sung jingle "Stay In Tonight - With Delight"). Most voice-overs work on a three-word-per-second basis, so I had 40 words to play around with (36 actually, but I spoke very slightly faster than normal), and I was able to fit in the entire text, and include the sung jingle, within the original 15 seconds taken by the speech-only ad.

Spend a long time working on the outline - the final recording should only be done when you have all the glitches worked out. If you cannot do a professional voice-over yourself, ask a local radio or club DJ to do it for you. And when you are completely satisfied - assemble your CD.

One trick I used was to copy an ad break from the local radio station, and then mix in my own creation right in the middle of it! Finally, meet the client. In most cases, you will have no trouble getting to see the manager or owner, and when you do so, explain that you need just two minutes of his time. If you have brought a portable CD unit with you - you can demonstrate it there and

then, and listen to any suggestions he might have. You can suggest that he can use his own voice on the jingle, and you can also point out that you can do these in different lengths depending on what he wants.

Obviously, the question of cost will come up - and here, it really is a matter of what the market will bear. Certainly, a fee of £500 will be too little (he is probably spending close to that every week just for the ad-time), and you can point out that it is a one-off investment (in fact there should be repeat business). I know several people charging £2000 per jingle - but you have to judge what your market will bear. If you have done your job correctly, he will bite, and you are in the door and on your way to a very lucrative income.

One final piece of advice - make the jingle first - then see the client. The shock value of coming in the door with a jingle works. And even if he does not take it, you still have a sample for later use.

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