

The 10 A&R Commandments

By Gian Fiero

Every time I speak at a conference or conduct my popular FACE THE MUSIC! workshop which offers a commercial critique of songs, I'm constantly asked what A&R professionals look for when it comes to evaluating and choosing artists they want to sign. While I can't tell you specifically why any A&R person signs a particular artist, I can tell you that there are some very prevalent thoughts and concerns that arise whenever I talk with them.

It almost seems as if a higher being whispered these guidelines, or commandments, to A&R professionals that they must honour and obey. These sacred, yet simple commandments influence and govern the decisions that apply to your talent and career. The commandments are listed below, followed by a brief explanation of each one.

I: You shall not sign an act that will put your job on the line.

As much as you would like to believe that signings are based on how much talent you have, it's really a numbers crunching game and talented artists get caught (and consequently dropped) in the numbers crunch all the time. Estimates for what it takes to properly record, market, and promote a new act range from 1 million to 10 million depending on the label. So when an A&R rep signs an act, they represent an investment of at least that much to the record company signing them. Ultimately, you will see that signings are more about the investment in the talent, than the talent itself as you read on.

II: You shall not sign an act that you can not (financially) justify.

Investments of any kind carry risks. Entertainment investments carry more than usual. If artists demonstrate a willingness to invest in themselves through the acquisition of quality recordings, and have actually achieved a significant amount (15,000 or more) of CD sales or paid downloads on their own, they can effectively reduce or minimize the risks that a record label will assume and justify the label's investment in the process.

III: You shall not take a competing artist under your label.

Record companies divvy up financial resources based upon the artists on their roster who are most likely to yield a return on their investment; therefore, to eliminate consumer confusion, they don't sign acts that will compete with the audiences of their favoured established acts - if they do, it normally spells a lack of commitment to the senior act and the newer act will soon be getting the attention (and financial support) from the executives.

IV: Remember commandment number I at all times.

Jobs are really hard to come by in the music industry. Good paying jobs are even harder. You can best believe that the guarded optimism or the cautious pessimism

(however you want to slice it) that an A&R person displays can always be linked to commandment I.

V: Honour group think.

Very few A&R reps have the power to sign an artist without having the decision approved by someone else. It's a community decision, and rightfully so. Would you give an employee at your company the right to commit 1 to 10 million dollars of your money to anything - much less anyone - without your approval? That's why such major A&R decisions are so bureaucratic. At best, your A&R person will be your cheerleader within that group of decision makers and can hopefully persuade them to sign and market you based on the justifications of commandment II. Usually, when a group of A&R people are excited about an act, others tend to be also. There's safety in numbers.

VI: You shall not destroy your chances of getting promoted.

A&R reps are very fearful of derailing their careers by violating commandments I and II. There is a large carrot that's often dangled in front of them, whether it's job security, a promotion, perks, or extra compensation to find viable acts (or to make signed acts more viable). Signing under-performing and/or under-achieving artists is a sure fire way to destroy those chances.

VII: You shall not commit resources to acts that have not proven their worth.

The R.O.I. (return on investment) ratio is a key factor in who gets attention at the record company. In this day and age of complex joint ventures, the R.O.I. is even more significant because of the alarmingly high number of acts that prove to be bad investments. The greater the potential you show for being a sound investment, the greater the commitment the label will be willing to make to you. The greater the commitment, the higher your budget.

VIII: You shall not sign an artist that you cannot proficiently market.

The operative word here is proficiently. When artists bare similarity to other successful artists, it's easier to target their audience. The boy bands in the 90s did it and there was enough profit to go around for everyone. Proof of this can be found in online music stores that are increasingly categorizing music and artists by who they sound like as often as they assort them by genre.

IX: You shall not sign acts that do not have a story.

The fact is, everybody has a story - no matter how boring it is. If your story is interesting, intriguing, or appealing, it gets industry attention and provides media angles for a publicist to pitch to TV talk shows, magazines, and newspapers. American Idol winners and finalists are getting contracts left and right because they have interesting stories.

X: You shall not waste time on artists that are not ready.

If an A&R rep has interest in you, they express it. You don't have to hound them with phone calls and emails. After all, that's not going to make them take more interest in you; that can be done more effectively by helping them honour their commandments and showing them that you are ready to take it to the next level by showing signs of being a good investment.

Gian Fiero is a recognized authority on commercial music who is best known for his comprehensive and insightful music reviews on The Muse's Muse.com. He has been an influential factor in obtaining record deals for artists signed to RCA, Bust It!, Gasoline Alley and Interscope Records. He is currently active in the music industry as an Independent A&R Specialist and represents Grammy nominated music producer Cori Jacobs (Beyonce, Pussy Cat Dolls, Lauryn Hill, Teedra Moses, Brooke Valentine, and George Clinton) in addition to being an adjunct professor of Music Industry Studies at San Francisco State's Music/Recording Industry Program.

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