

What will make a retailer accept your CD? By Chris Standing

I get many e-mails weekly from artists and groups asking me about distribution. They say "We have a band and we're playing locally and getting good crowds and we sell our CD at gigs. We started our own label and need to get distribution so we can sell in all the stores. How can we do that?" The odds are that you cannot afford to have distribution. Let me explain why...

Most inexperienced folks believe that a distributor is the pipeline to the people. In theory it is but in practice it is not. A distribution company is only as good as the record companies' promotional power. Yes, it is important to get your CD in the store, but it is much more important to get your CD OUT of that store. It's as much the record company's job to do that as it is retailer's. A distributor can only try his hardest to convince a retail store to take your CD. To secure shelf space, a record company needs to outline all its marketing commitments (and honour them) so that the retailer stays confident that he can shift units.

Let's face it - record stores are saturated with product. Why on earth would a store take a CD if it isn't sure it will get sold? The kind of things that retailers need to see if they are to readily accept your product are:

Radio Play - If a single is being worked at radio (through an independent radio promoter) and getting spins, this might be enough to convince a store in that neighbourhood to take your record. The amount of demand for the record will determine the amount of units the store takes.

Retail Price And Positioning - Visibility in a record store is everything! If you were to buy an "end cap" (those displays at the end of an aisle), or a month on a listening station, or rack display, this is enough to attract the attention of a store. However, it has become increasingly competitive even when you pay for this!

Touring - Playing live shows can help create a demand for a CD which is key.

All labels have what they call a "one sheet" - a hand out sheet with bullet points outlining their marketing strategies and promotional commitments. This is the first step, but then those commitments have to be met. These commitments are extremely expensive.

If a label refuses to spend promotional money on their act, a number of things can result. The CDs remain in the store buried amongst the thousands of others waiting to be found; the CDs after a matter of weeks get returned to the record label; the record store takes less units from the same artist's *next* CD, often refusing to stock it altogether.

The last point is interesting. A brand new artist can generate much more excitement in the retail marketplace than an artist with a failed record. The label with the new artist, providing they stump up their promotional dollars and have a good several weeks on radio before they go to retail, can distribute a good amount of units in the marketplace. The artist with a previous record that "bombed" will need to do a good deal more convincing in order to get the stores to take more product.

So my big question is; "*Can you afford distribution?*" To get a record in every store via a reputable distributor immediately puts you in competition with major labels who have gobs of promotional money they can drop if they need to.

My advice for independent artists is to localise. By all means try to get your CD in retail stores, but do it yourself. Strike up a relationship with the store buyer and offer your CDs on consignment. Don't give them any risk. When you do gigs in that neighborhood, make a point of telling your audience that they can buy your CD in such and such store (even if you sell CDs at your gigs!).

Do what you can to get some radio play in that area too. This, along with your live shows, might create a certain amount of demand to shift enough units for each retail store to take you seriously and want to continue to support you. From time to time record stores will do "in store appearances" with independent artists and this will allow you to build a stronger relationship with a store, and sell a few units. In a perfect world that store may even add your disc to a listening station for a month to help generate some business. I have seen this happen many times. They understand that it costs labels thousands of dollars to do this and that indies are operating on a shoestring. They very often want to help if they believe in a band.

Having said this, retail pretty much wants to deal only with distributors and labels. However, they will support a new artist if they like them. Walk into your local store and ask to speak to the buyer. Give him your CD, be nice and see what happens. Remember, don't just think about getting your CD IN the store, think about how you might get it OUT!

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http://www.musicbizacademy.com/articles/cs_distribution.htm