



DISC MAKERS PARTNER PROGRAM PRESENTS

THE ART OF RUNNING A SUCCESSFUL RECORDING STUDIO



Advice and Insights From Studio Pros





“RECORDING STUDIOS ARE THE ULTIMATE INTERSECTION OF ART AND COMMERCE.”

“It’s a challenge to maintain an environment that’s conducive to creativity that still portrays a no-nonsense business approach. You are asking people to pay for your creativity, experience, and input. They are not paying for your new microphone or cappuccino machine.”

– DAVE DARLINGTON, Bass Hit Recording

Managing and maintaining a successful professional recording studio blends a passion for creative art, a command of the science of recording, the ability to think like an entrepreneur, and the resilience and foresight to adapt to an ever-changing landscape. Just as technology and the Internet have forever changed the industry for music artists, the same advances and changes have indelibly altered the recording industry.

Social media and the Internet have also altered the model in regard to how most studios attract and retain new business. Inevitably, some studios found that easy accessibility to

high-end equipment and DAWs decimated their business models, while others have been able to adapt, recalibrate, and find ways to thrive in the new music industry.

We reached out to eight successful studios to gain insight into what has changed most, what they’ve done to adapt to the market, and how they continue to be relevant in an environment where DIY means a lot of recording is done in home or project studios.



PART I: CHANGES TO THE RECORDING ENVIRONMENT

“We have to ride the fine line between art, dreams, and commerce. So while there is an objective quality to what we have to do, there is also a huge subjective element to it as well.”

– JIM DEMAIN, Yes Master Studios



The recording environment of today looks very little like the landscape of 25 years ago. Our studio owners give insights to pinpoint specific changes they've noticed in the industry since they first opened their doors.

1 Smaller projects

As a whole, today's artists are releasing more EPs and singles, as opposed to full-length albums, which were the standard 10–15 years ago. This has changed the economy of scale for many studios, as the income from an EP is obviously less than it would be for a full-length project. This affects recording projects as well as mixing/mastering projects for studios of all sizes.

2 Access to powerful recording equipment

As recording spaces have shrunk and consoles and racks of equipment have been replaced by DAWs, plug-ins, and powerful computers, more work is done in smaller and/or home studio environments. \$1,000 can buy a recording set up that might have cost tens of thousands of dollars two decades ago.

3 Faster speeds ≠ better or faster work

Digital recording environments have made some things in the recording process faster — it's easier to recall mixes in the digital realm than it ever was in the world of analog. One result of this is that the creative process, in regard to recording, has been altered. With the ease of recall and making changes, a degree of spontaneity — and arguably musical craftsmanship — has been lost in the recording process. The end result actually means the recording process can often take longer, which is one contributing factor to...

4 Time between projects has increased

There are many contributing factors — including the rise in the popularity of singles, ubiquitous home recording environments, and the extended time spent on the recording process — that have increased the amount of time between projects that require a professional studio. The result is that studios need to fill their pipelines with more clients to keep the studio time booked.

5 A larger pool of potential clients

The relative ease and low price of releasing a project has made it possible for more artists than ever to record and release a CD. Studios still need to educate and attract these potential clients, but the work you're looking for is often out there.

6 Fewer options for recording large ensembles

The smaller studio spaces have their benefits, but there has been a decrease in the number of studios in which larger ensembles (orchestras, choirs, full bands) can be effectively recorded. This can work to the advantage of a professional studio with a large, acoustically pristine live room.

7 Savvy clients

Many folks coming into the studio today are fairly competent when it comes to the technical elements of the recording process. For example, today's client might understand the value of a 24-bit mix as it relates to his music being made ready for download.

8 New technology and new opportunities

As the tools for recording have become more attainable, more musicians are capable of recording some, or all of their work, in their own home studios. This hasn't made the need for professional recording studios disappear, but the model

has changed. Many of the projects that begin at private home studios end up being mixed, mastered, and finished in professional studios, where there's the added benefit of the experience and expertise of the audio engineers who operate these facilities.



PART II: FINDING NEW BUSINESS

“I think one of the most important things to realize about a studio is it really is about relationships. Many people get into recording because they love music. That's the same reason I got into it as well, but to stay successful, you have to realize it's people first. Obviously you're going to create music and do the best job as you know how, but don't forget that it's the positive relationships you form that will create the happiest clients who will keep coming back.”

– BROOK FLOYD, Rainmaker Studios



While word of mouth always was, and continues to be, the overwhelming source of incoming business for studios, the process of generating referrals has changed. With an increase of music discovery happening online, relying on album and recording credits to solidify your association with a project or a niche can't be relied on as it was in the past. Advertising or getting editorial placement in pro audio, music industry, and targeted print publications is also more difficult to come by. So what do you do?

1 Word of mouth

Nothing speaks louder for your studio and capabilities like a great sounding product and an artist lavishing praise for their experience in your studio. True, some of the standard methods (album credits, editorial placement) are less prevalent in today's industry environment, but finding creative ways to develop ambassadors of your brand is a large part of keeping your phone ringing.

2 Sharing your expertise

Creating a blog and maintaining your website can go a long way toward defining you as an expert in your field and in your demographic location. It might be the same information you've always shared with clients, engineers, and producers, but the channels for broadcasting your message have changed.

3 Social media

Social media provides a forum to share your expertise and generate word of mouth referrals. It's also an opportunity to solidify connections with artists you've worked with and make inroads into the genres or services you specialize in.

4 Go where the artists go

To connect with potential clients, you need to go where the musicians are. What's changed is where you have to go to find them. In the past, local clubs and venues were a great place to hang around and get your name out, but the Internet has improved the efficiency in which you can target and make connections with prospective clients, wherever they are. Now you can seek work from all corners of the globe, and international collaborations can help spread the word of your studio on a wider scale.

5 Multi-channel marketing

New pathways of communication can open new doors, and multi-channel efforts like coupling your social network marketing with radio station co-ops or online forums can make a substantial impact. Other avenues, such as positive Yelp reviews and a presence on online forums like Gearsluts can attract new clients.

6 Album credits

While the CD liner note may be less prevalent than decades ago, plenty of successful independent and label acts rely on CDs and merch sales as a way to make their living. So while segments of the industry and music consumers are relying on digital product, getting properly credited on an album is still a great way to promote your studio.

7 Specialize

Trying to be all things to everybody is not a recipe for standing out. Pick a specialty — a genre, service, sound — and exploit that to the maximum.

8 Diversify

Then again, offering additional professional services — like video production, a sound stage, live video/audio recording, or an engineering education program — can help bring in business you never could have had before. Find ways to maximize your expertise and space.

9 Build a personal network

Working with people in your community — teachers, school bands, rehearsal studios, Disc Makers — can help magnify your word of mouth efforts. One teacher recommending you can bring in more business than you trying to reach each student one by one. And while all the social and online tools make it easier connect to potentially targeted and larger groups from your studio office, you still need to take the time and have the skills to create personal relationships with your potential clientele.



PART III: WORDS OF WISDOM ON A VARIETY OF TOPICS

“Being involved in the creative arts is the bomb. The energy that emits from a working recording studio can be amazing. Another benefit is that the projects are ever-changing, so boredom rarely sets in. There are new folks to deal with, facility upgrades, and new toys to play with every few months. It beats having a real job!”

– DREW RAISON, Philly Sound Studios



Success in this business is not just about how good you are in the studio, but how good you are at management, marketing, networking, and business development.

Better Business

I think it's easy to believe that this business is different than others, but fundamentally it is not. If you intend to make a living at this, you have to treat it like any other real business. You should learn to do basic accounting. You should know

how much you have to gross each month and where you stand financially each week. You should have all of the required permits and licenses to do business legally in your area. – *David Harris, Studio B Mastering*

Time Management

Taking the time for preparation and quality control are hard to bill for, but essential to success. Studios have to be vigilant about being as efficient as possible without compromising quality.

– Robert Bullington, *Front Row Seat Productions*

Swiss Army Knives

30 years ago, Airshow was a Swiss Army knife audio service, we did live recordings, editing, mastering, and remote broadcasts (hence, “air show”). With the introduction of CDs, we found a niche in mastering and built the company on that service, with multiple mastering engineers and multiple rooms. After the tech bust/recession of 2000–2001, we re-examined our opportunities and were able to attract mixers and support them by building some fine near-field rooms. Go forward to the end of the decade, and we saw an opportunity in that music production had moved to project studios, and good tracking rooms for grown-up music were hard to find. Now we’re back to being a Swiss Army knife audio services company, with a fine tracking studio, production room, and mastering rooms.

– Ann Blonston, *General Manager at Airshow Inc.*

Reinventing The Wheel

It is not my job to reinvent the wheel, or change the artistic intent of a project. As a mastering engineer, I have to make sure that the mixes and songs I work on stand up and sound good on as many systems as possible and that the masters we deliver are correct and error free. It’s like being a museum curator. While you want each painting hanging in the gallery to look good, you don’t want to fill the gallery with a bunch of paintings that all look exactly alike. I always work toward letting each project become what it wants to be.

– Jim Demain, *Yes Master Studios*

Maintaining Excellence

There’s a point in developing a business where it ends up at a crossroad where you can either expand or stay where you’re at. My best advice is to add services only when you know you can really handle them to their fullest extent and offer your clients the exact same level of excellence they have come to expect from your company. I’ve seen some great studios operated by colleagues of mine that continued to add services but didn’t make sure the underlying infrastructure was there to support it. Ultimately all their work ended up suffering due to the fact they were spread too thin and couldn’t put 100% into any one thing. That said, expansion and diversification can be a good thing when done properly. Besides the core services I offer of composition, production, recording and mastering, I have gradually added full-service CD duplication services (with the help of Disc Makers), graphic design/photography, live on-location recording, and even a music DJ for parties and events.

– Brook Floyd, *Rainmaker Studios*

Plugging in

The explosion of high-quality plug-ins has given me the confidence to offer mastering/assembly services to my mix clients. I also offer unattended mixing for overseas clients. The files are transferred over the Internet and then mixed. The client makes notes and I do follow-up tweaks. I have many great friends and clients overseas whom I’ve never met!

– Dave Darlington, *Bass Hit Recording*

Standing Out

Introduce something special that other studios have overlooked. I’ve invested in a really great piano that jazz and classical musicians love. My piano technician is actually one of my best referral sources.

– Robert Bullington, *Front Row Seat Productions*

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– ROBERT BULLINGTON, *Front Row Seat Productions*

Packaging

Our business model is based on diversification. We offer more services focused on specific segments of a client's project rather than the entire project. For instance, we market just the drum or vocal cutting portion. We even have a "gang vocal" package that makes our huge room accessible for the DIY pop punk and heavy metal folk. We also offer packages to "punch-up" your tracks through our console and outboard gear as well as re-amping in our big room. We still love full-length total album production, but these smaller packages can really benefit the DIY projects that otherwise wouldn't be using a pro studio. – *Drew Raison, Philly Sound Studios*

Catalogs

We've become more focused on providing services that are catalog-related. For example, we're the only mastering studio to offer Plangent processing of analog master tapes. It delivers a level of clarity and depth that make re-issues compelling to customers who want high-res digital audio. We embraced "Mastered for iTunes" certification, and we offer encoding and delivery of 24-bit files for sale on HDTracks. These are interesting digital re-issue opportunities. And we created The Restoration Center at Airshow, to accommodate the needs of larger audio collections, including everything from label catalogs to cultural archives. – *David Glasser, Chief Engineer at Airshow Inc.*



PART IV: THE MANTRA OF A SUCCESSFUL STUDIO

“It seems obvious, but sometimes making sure you have the facility and ability to produce great-sounding product is overlooked in favor of marketing. I've seen studios open before they were ready to compete sonically with their peers. Better to wait until you have the gear and know-how to make a go of it.”

– JUSTIN WEIS, Trakworx Recording and Mastering



All of our studios chimed in on what they see as the qualities to success in the studio business. But, warns David Harris of Studio B Mastering, "None of these things is nearly as simple to achieve as it may sound."

1 Be consistent

Turn out excellent work on a consistent basis.

2 Build a great staff

Nothing beats a seasoned staff of pros with diverse experience, a great work ethic, and a commitment to their own engineering practice.

3 Focus on sound

An acoustically correct facility that is fitted with well-maintained, professional recording equipment is a major reason people will choose to work in your studio.

4 Have a customer focus

Listen to your customers' feedback, meet their needs, and always be kind and professional. Repeat business and referrals will follow.

5 Nail your deadlines

Getting your clients' work done on (or before) the agreed time frame is imperative – blowing peoples deadlines just doesn't work.

6 Be a leader

Stay engaged in your industry and think about what's around the corner. Clients expect you to help them adapt and do new things in the music business.

7 Be responsive

Respond to inquiries and requests in a professional, knowledgeable, and timely manner.

8 Have a good attitude

You and your staff must have positive, friendly, and helpful attitudes.

9 Meet your clients' needs

A recording studio is a service business: it's really all about what the client wants.

10 Develop a rapport with your clients

Give your clients a sense that you are in it together, that their concerns are your concerns, and you will do everything in your power to make their project world class.

11 Care about the people you're working for

Genuinely caring about your clients and their projects is a huge part of building lasting relationships.

12 Maintain a clean and comfortable environment

A professional environment that lends itself to the creative inspiration of making music is part of what your clients are paying for.

13 Operate like a business

You need a well-planned operating system for marketing, booking, daily administration, and a view to the future

14 Don't nickel and dime

Go the extra mile without charging for every 1/5 mile like a taxicab. Sometimes that extra reprint or free use of studio-owned musical instruments will win you a client (and advertiser) for life.

15 Know thyself

Cultivate an ability to identify your own areas of excellence and pursue clients and referral sources who know and appreciate those qualities. You also need a constitution that includes an open mind, creative soul, strong work ethic, and a desire to educate.

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16 Be efficient

You need to have the technology and expertise to speed up production without compromising quality. Inefficiency equals lost billable hours.

17 Offer free parking

An easy load in helps, too.

18 Offer free WiFi

And provide a house computer with Internet access.

19 Make good coffee

Tea and decaf, too!

THANKS TO THE STUDIO PARTNERS WHO HELPED
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Ann Blonston and David Glasser

Airshow Inc.

Boulder, CO

www.airshowmastering.com



Jim Demain

Yes Master Studios

Nashville, TN

www.yesmasterstudios.com



David Harris

Studio B Mastering

Charlotte, NC

www.studiobmastering.com



Drew Raison

Philly Sound Studios

Philadelphia, PA

www.phillysoundstudios.net



Dave Darlington

Bass Hit Recording

New York, NY

www.davedarlington.com



Brook Floyd

Rainmaker Studios

Kennewick, WA

www.rainmakerstudios.net



Robert Bullington

Front Row Seat Productions

Trenton, NJ

www.frsprod.com



Justin Weis

Trakworx Recording and Mastering

San Francisco, CA

www.trakworx.com

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