

# Tune in to the vibe

Bombarded by visual branding, how often do we spare a thought for the audio equivalent? **Tom Banks** reports on sonic identity consultancy

Sonic branding must be one of the most intangible and poorly understood forms of branding. At its simplest, it is a jingle or memorable sound attached to an ident, while at its most complex, it is a sonic strategy for a global brand, or a composition that can capture the essence of a company and be translated through a different medium.

Nick Ryan, of Nick Ryan Music and Sound Design Consultancy, is an audio and media consultant currently working on a sonic strategy for a major airline.

Contracted by Landor, which is undertaking a complete rebrand for the company, Ryan's strategy will start to roll out towards the end of the project next year.

Ryan says, 'Sonic strategy can be incorporated into every aspect of the brand – from a sonic identity, voices and type of music, through to the acoustics of the aircraft itself. It's a real, rather than metaphorical, journey for the customer, so we need to convey the mood of the brand throughout.'

Music choice is always a key consideration, as airlines have a monopoly over certain types of genres across their branding, according to Ryan. He says, 'Virgin used hip-hop and American Airlines classical music. We have to think about playlists on the aircraft, but really it's about presenting an end-to-end audio experience.'

Much like Ryan, Radium Audio works with brands and consultancies to 'articulate the soul of the brand with sound'. The consultancy's creative director Andrew Diey has worked on high-end brands including Bentley, Ferrari and Mercedes, as well

as Domestos, Nike and Coke.

The consultancy's work is often technical in approach when capturing the sounds of products, before translating them into a brand experience. Diey is measured when raising this, though. 'We're sonic identity consultants essentially, but use the techniques of Hollywood to capture the soul of the brand,' he says.

Indeed, the technical capacity at Radium Audio's disposal could allow it to record the heartbeat of a snail or an ant walking across a glass plate – should it choose to.

Working for Ferrari last year, on an 'online sonic experience' to brand its California car, the consultancy installed eight microphones in the vehicle as it was driven round a test track at high speed.

Commissioned by digital consultancy AKQA, Diey's team plotted the car's soundtrack to create an audio-visual Web-based experience for visitors to the Ferrari California site.

For Bentley's Continental GT, Diey worked on sounds within the car itself – designing the tick-tock of the indicator and the alerting noise a seat-belt makes when not secure. The resulting sounds are described by Diey as evoking the 'post-Victorian mechanical world of the 1920s and 1930s'.

The consultancy is now looking at consolidating its experience within the motoring industry to produce a sound-activated device that drivers can use to operate an in-car navigation system – TVs, GPS or voice-activated phones. Using paddles around the steering wheel, drivers would be guided to each device with a familiar sound.

Even high street brands like



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Homebase are dissected to the minutiae so Diey can build a sonic identity. Composing a score from 'things we found in Homebase', a piece of music was created to accompany the store's 'Make a house a home' ad.

Sonic branding can work on a more immediate level. House Studios is a one-person sound design consultancy headed up by Rich House. Working across advertising, TV/cinema branding, title sequences and interactive formats, House creates his own synthetic sounds, or uses licensed sound effects to build a brand's sound.

Currently working with a major UK broadcaster, House is sourcing and creating 'technological' sound effects for a new ident.

In a separate project for Sky Travel last year, House was given the moving image for an ident and its accompanying soundtrack, and then had to

find and make sounds to 'create the ambience of travel'. He says, 'I record what I can and sample sounds – it's that combination of sounds and atmospherics that can help make the brand recognisable.'

Consultancies that don't specialise in sonic branding are more readily considering its power and clients are becoming more receptive.

Bill Wallsgrove, owner of Big Idea, is working with a client on a project that will incorporate an element of sound branding. He says he's been 'banging on to clients for a while, to see if they've thought about what their brands sound like'.

Some companies, he says, are using music that other companies have used without due thought. 'You wouldn't use someone else's logo. I guess name, look and feel, tone of voice and sonic application should be thought of with the same regard,' he says.



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1 and 2 Radium Audio's equipment for capturing and creating sounds

## SONIC FUTURES

- Honda has already used choristers in an ad to mimic the sounds of vehicles. In a new viral, the car manufacturer has created a ridged road which plays the William Tell Overture, to promote the Honda Civic
- Nick Ryan is working on the sonic branding of a magazine, This Is Order, by producing a cover on which rhythmic information will be printed, using embossing and foil-blocking, so it can be 'played' with a fingernail or coin
- Andrew Diey believes sonic branding will soon be taken to point-of-sale material, where products will reveal a sound signifier or sonic ident as they are scanned through tills