

Soundtrack to your small business; can music help in retail?

Music has the ability to influence people's thinking, mood and understanding, often without them noticing. It's been used in restaurants and bars for centuries, but how are other types of businesses getting creative with sound?

Sarah Muir, chef to stars including Robbie Williams, Whitney Houston, and Oasis, knows only too well about how music can affect people's state of mind. After 25 years of cooking around the world on the road, she decided to start her own business: [Arches Cookery School](#) in Yorkshire.

Muir had seen how music could promote happiness and relax her chefs and staff when touring, and realised it could also help in the school: "Ambience is what people pick up on straight away; when people walk into my cookery school, they don't know what to expect and may be apprehensive.

"If there's lovely music and it's not deathly silent then they feel more relaxed. They're still learning, but in a really nice state of mind." It's this positive feeling of being at ease the cookery teacher believes gives her school a memorable edge.

It's important to choose the right genre for your clients, and that this reflects your business. The school has a wide range of age groups to account for, and personal taste doesn't always fit the bill. Muir explains: "I choose music that befits my business, my personality and showcases my way of thinking. It's important to me for people to think the cookery school has great music."

"I'm not your usual cookery school teacher. I love music, I'm upbeat and optimistic, and I want the music I play to my clients to reflect me, and make them feel good and make them want to cook. For example, there's no point starting a cookery lesson with a slow symphony," she says.

As well as creating a good vibe for customers, the music you choose can also help to guide them towards a greater understanding of what you're trying to achieve.

Holly Lander and Orla Bennett, cofounders of [Atomica Gallery](#), which holds pop-up art exhibitions, believe gallery spaces don't need to be stereotypically silent. They say that playing music can help

people understand both the business and artists behind the creations on show: “For us, music is part of our personalities and we want it to help design an environment that’s inviting.

“It goes hand in hand with the art because a lot of the artists we work with are often really into music or in bands, and also design gig posters. We also do shows about musicians who influence them. It’s part of what we sell,” says Lander.

The duo also use music at their launch events: “We always have a DJ playing at opening nights and music is a big part of the event. It helps people understand the art and feel comfortable with it. We pick the most suitable people to play based on their type of music. It’s a major part of how we create events.”

It’s generally understood that if you can get someone feeling at ease and relaxed, you’ll be able to sell to them. And the right tunes can do this. That’s why [portrait photographer Sarah Petty](#) has been using carefully selected songs in her sales process since she opened for business three years ago.

Most photographers give customers a CD of their pictures or, more traditionally, a sheet of tiny proofs. But often these never make it to the wall. Instead of leaving clients to agonize over which, if any, to buy at home, she brings them in for a presentation of their prints, complete with a personalized soundtrack.

She explains: “When people come back to see the images, they’re often very nervous. But I know I’ve got great shots to show, and want to get them in the right spirit with the music.” The photographer then guides them through the decision-making and buying process.

With the rise of digital cameras and affordable printing, the opportunities for traditional photographers have decreased, and competition has shot through the roof. By offering a more emotional and pleasant experience, this Illinois-based business gives customers every reason to come back and recommend its services to friends – all through the power of music.

Ryan James, chairman of the Glasgow Restaurant Association, and owner of the [Two Fat Ladies](#) restaurants, has been playing music in his eateries for more than 25 years: “We spend a lot of time picking songs we think our customers will enjoy and which will reflect their dining experience; it is another element of the customer service we offer,” he says.

But don't be lulled into thinking you can put on any old tracks: "Your music choice is a statement and it needs to show who you are as a business, individual and company. If you get it right, people don't even realize it's happening but they'll get the culture. It's the psychology of business and retail." But not all retail spaces get it right. Shopping malls and hotel foyers normally have dreadful music, warns James.

Research has found fast pop music often leads to more impulsive buying in retail spaces. Whereas classical music in restaurants leads to people eating slower. "Noise and especially music affects us psychologically, physiologically, cognitively and also has an impact on our behaviour. Thus music in stores should be selected carefully to ensure that it affects the shopper in a way that it achieves what the retailer or store wants to achieve, normally an increase in sales," says Dr. Christine Rivers from the University of Surrey.

"A good example is the use of Christmas songs very early in the season or repeating them: this can have a negative effect on buying behaviour. However, well-selected music can also encourage shoppers to spend more money, and if the experience was positive, be more likely to return."

If you are feeling inspired to add a soundtrack to your small business, it's important to make sure you have the correct licensing. Not having the correct license could cause a legal issue for your business: "If a business or organization requires a license but does not obtain one, they will be infringing copyright and may ultimately face legal proceedings. A court can order the business to pay damages for copyright infringement, legal costs and issue an injunction to stop the business playing recorded music until this is done," says Christine Geissmar, operations director at PPL.