

Music and the Web

So what's up with music on the internet, anyway? Too much of nothing at all! Most find the ubiquitous soundtracks on Myspace pages to be a nuisance, and major labels are going out of their way to keep the good stuff off the web entirely. But this is a problem of design and deployment. Sound and music can be the perfect accompaniment for your message.

To get a better handle on this, let's look at music and the internet separately. Music is generally used in a few familiar ways. Broadly, music is a form of entertainment that triggers an emotional response in most people. Beyond the purely entertainment-oriented original music of pop stars, we're accustomed to hearing music on the radio, in TV shows and movies, as well as in the commercials and trailers that accompany them. These songs and melodies are selected from libraries of commercial or "needle-drop" tracks, or composed as custom original tracks, exclusive to a particular product or message. Most custom music is found in branded settings, while needle-drop is commonly used where a generic underscore or soundtrack is acceptable.

While the internet and www easily handle sound or video, it's primarily a text-based medium. Our reading there is non-linear: we don't just skip from site to site via links, we fluidly move between windows and applications as well. We frequently bounce over to Word or a Calendar program, cutting/pasting/dropping links into paper documents and emails as we jump around. We lean back to watch TV in our living rooms, but lean-in to our web browsers. So surfing the web has more in common with reading a magazine or newspaper than watching TV.

Sound is a powerful, effective way to deliver messages passively, but the internet is an active medium. The majority of broadband web-users have high speed connections at work, but not at home. As a result, unexpected sounds are more of an irritant than attraction. Conversely, subtle roll-over effects, soft background sounds and effects that relate to things the user sees or does on your site entice users to pump up the volume. Emotional connections are key to making a point or selling a product, and music is one of the best tools to make connections. We aim to keep them tuned in, with the sound turned on, so they can receive your transmissions. Here are some rules to get us there...

Location, Location, Location!

So what makes music work (or not!) on a website? Location, location, location! The user's environment and the music's location within the site define whether the music is heard at all. Stick a generic music loop on your opening page, and you virtually guarantee that no one browsing at work will hear your soundtrack at all. Those who haven't already hit the mute button, will do so once your music begins to play unbidden and unexpectedly. On the other hand, music serving as accompaniment for a Flash display piece, will always be heard because it's appropriately tied to a message that user clicked-to-get. A good rule of thumb is to tie music to actions, and avoid "push" sound like the plague.

Branded Sound is More Effective...

and More Useful Everyone knows the NBC chimes by heart, and most of us can identify popular jingles in 3 notes or less. That's what makes a jingle aesthetically good or bad! But from a functional perspective, flexibility and uniqueness matter. NPR's familiar theme song for All Things Considered has been around for over 30 years, and yet it remains fresh because the sound designers vary instrumentation, beats and delivery. Same old song, delivered differently each day! Custom, branded sound is exclusive to the entity commissioning the composition, so it can function as a logo on the web.

Get Out of the Loop!

The only thing more annoying than a loud, unexpected blast of bad music is an endlessly repeating loop of loud, bad music. Heck, even GOOD music gets old after a few laps around the track! Any sound deployed on the web must be level-balanced against the sounds and music users actually want to hear; in other words, any un-bidden sound louder than songs in their MP3 library is bad sound. Loop that bad sound (with or without the hitch in the beat from selecting the wrong loop-point) and you've guaranteed your visitors will hit the mute.

Where There's Motion, There's Sound

In the real world, things that move make noise. The same is true in cartoons and conventional animation. Everyone knows that music is a good emotional trigger, but it's also a most sophisticated framework or grid to tie motion elements into. Animators and designers frequently select music that fits the mood and attitude of the message, then key events and motion to the beat. If things are moving, music is almost always appropriate.

Don't Mix Metaphors: The Web is NOT TV

Music is ubiquitous on TV and the radio, in programs as well as commercials. Music on the web is an application and as such it's rare. Flash sites and animation live somewhere between these worlds however. With that in mind, a safe assumption would be that wherever there is motion, sound (and often music) can enhance it. Music fits when you have lots of visual action, or animated characters, because such pieces aim to be passively viewed, and emotionally engaging. Music is less useful when you're asking the visitor to read or interact (roll-over sounds are ideal cues for navigation and enticing voice-overs can nudge a visitor back to a previously opened page however).

About the Author

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