

MTV

Who on earth would want to watch music television?

HERE IS A BUSINESS IDEA. CREATE A LOW-COST CABLE television channel that will reach one billion cool twelve- to thirty-four-year-olds, get record companies to pay for all the content, and make a ton off advertising revenue and subscriber fees. Make the station so influential that not only will it make or break artists, but politicians will clamor to get on air, and presidents will even try and play the sax on it. The channel will grow to have double the viewers of CNN and become a global brand alongside heavyweights such as Coke, Nike, and Levi's.

Back in 1981, a new cable channel appeared in the United States. Everything about it was deliberately different, from its in-your-face logo, thrashing theme songs and frenetic style through to its content—wall-to-wall music. MTV changed cable television, and it altered the course of the music industry. It ushered in an era where music fans would watch a song as opposed to simply listening to it. From the very first clip it played, the prophetic “Video Killed the Radio Star,” MTV was on to something. “Not since silent films gave way to talkies has such substantial change been forced upon performing artists so quickly,” says *New York Times* chief film critic Janet Maslin.

The previous generation was lucky to watch an hour or two of their favorite musicians on Ed Sullivan or *Top of the Pops*. Considering how popular these programs were and how hot a commodity rock'n'roll was, it is quite baffling as to why no one had thought of music television before. When MTV launched, rock videos were in their infancy, with pioneers such as ABBA (who

worked with renowned Swedish director Lasse Hallström on their clips because the band was sick of touring) and Queen. These bands were trailblazers, leading their onslaught with dry ice, kaleidoscope camera work, tight pants, and very rudimentary styling.

“When we first introduced the idea of MTV, no one in the entertainment industry thought it would succeed because the programming was too narrow,” says Robert Pittman, a top rating disc jockey turned radio programmer from Mississippi who would become one of the fathers of MTV along with David Horowitz, John Skyes, and John Lack.

Pittman (or “Pitchman”) is the son of a Methodist minister. By the age of twenty-one he was the highest paid radio programmer in the U.S. Pittman began researching the potential for an all-music channel for cable television in 1980 despite the fact that his critics said music should be heard and not seen. He was backed by the Warner Amex Satellite Entertainment Company. In August 1981, MTV went live through 300 cable networks. It was Pittman who is credited with the “I want my MTV” moniker as part of a campaign to get more cable companies signing on for MTV. Pittman had David Bowie and Mick Jagger, for example, telling viewers to tell their cable company, “I Want My MTV.” Of course Bowie and Jagger helped out the cause, wanting to keep their videos on high rotation.

Pittman’s strategy has always been content driven, with a strong emphasis on brand-building. He wanted his audience to immediately recognize that MTV was something different. From there, advertisers could be inspired to tailor campaigns specifically to this demographic. Within two years 1,775 cable companies were airing MTV. Pittman left MTV in 1987 after a failed management buyout. He had risen from program director to CEO, had launched channels such as VH-1, Nickelodeon and Nick at Nite, and Court TV, and presided over its Initial Public Offering. Pittman then started his own company, Quantum Media, the beginning of an eclectic phase in his career that included stints running Century 21 Real Estate,

the Six Flags Theme Parks, and AOL. He left AOL, a Time Warner company, in 2002 to concentrate on his investment vehicle The Pilot Group. He has always been modest about his MTV years, but clearly they have taken a toll on him. “I never want to build another brand as long as I live. It takes about a billion dollars of marketing and five to ten years,” he said.

MTV now reaches subscribers in 166 countries. As MTV has grown and found new markets, it has been careful to feed local audiences 70 percent local content, with local veejays. New Yorkers don’t necessarily love the same music as Parisians.

MTV is not sitting back enjoying its success, either. No only does it have to deal with increasingly conservative censorship laws (described by some analysts as cable TV getting its mouth washed out); it has to contend with Rupert Murdoch’s Sky Channel, which is gaining ground, particularly in Europe, and the challenges of digital technology, which create whole new opportunities for delivering content. The key to its growth is not in broadcasting its music videos, but in coming up with innovative programs, such as stunt crazy *Jackass*, that are helping the station to build its audience as well as develop in international markets. It is also devising new stations and interactive components as part of its expansion. Its research department is so obsessed with its precious teenage audience that it now employs people who track trends, to the point where they are happy to look in adolescent boys’ smelly bedrooms to see what posters are on their walls to see what makes them tick, the shoes they wear, and the tracks they want to download for their iPods. MTV tapped into the lucrative youth market, and it can’t afford to lose touch with the people that bring home the bacon.

Pittman told *Harvard Business Review* in 2005 that the best advice he ever got is to “ignore conventional wisdom.” While developing MTV he was told time and time again that “music was meant to be heard, not seen.” Says Pittman: “Imagine if we had listened.”

NOTES

“Not since silent films . . .” Maslin, Janet. “A Song Is No Longer Strictly a Song, Now It’s a Video,” section 2, *New York Times*, 1.23.83, p. 23.

“When we first introduced . . .” *Advertising Age*, “Pittman Gets Physical with Six Flags,” 6.1.92, p. 47.

“I never want to build . . .” Kornblum, Janet. *CNET News*, 4.21.97.

“Ignore conventional . . .” *Harvard Business Review* “The Best Advice I Ever Got,” 1.05.

REFERENCES

Advertising Age, *AdWeek*, *Business 2.0*, *BusinessWeek*, CNN, *Columbia Journalism Review*, *Daily Variety*, *Financial Times*, *The Guardian*, *The Hollywood Reporter*, Hoover’s Company Capsules, *Red Herring*, *Salon*, *Telegraph*, *Wall Street Journal*, *Washington Post*, *Washington Times*

TiVo

Let me into your home

YOU HAVE A TRULY AMAZING PRODUCT. A DEVICE SO IMMEDIATELY essential that its users cannot believe they once lived without it. Surely that’s enough to guarantee success? Not in the case of TiVo, the next-generation video recorder that has the potential to change everything about the way the world watches television, if only we’d give it a chance.

TiVo’s creators, Michael Ramsay and Jim Barton, started their own company in Sunnyvale, California, on August 4, 1997. They had both worked for years in tech firms, Ramsay at Silicon Graphics and Barton at a company called Network Age Software, where he gathered the initial ideas for TiVo, though he had also worked previously on a joint venture between Silicon Graphics and AT&T to launch a small-scale interactive television system in Florida.