



# Marketing Music: A Series of Articles on the topic of Marketing for Musicians and Bands

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By: Peter Risman  
Pilot Marketing Strategy  
Peter@PilotMarketingStrategy.com  
www.PilotMarketingStrategy.com

## Installment 2 – Your Core Beliefs

What is a brand, anyhow? Many people think that a **logo** is a **brand**.

Wrong. A logo is not a brand, any more than a lead singer is a band.

A brand is the sum of all the possible ways that an audience can experience your band. We'll break it down into these pieces:

- Core Beliefs
- Main Message
- Personality
- Identity Signatures

## Selling Out

Let's begin by thinking about the phrase "selling out". Not in a good way, as in "I tried to see them on their last tour, but they sold out every show they played." I mean in a bad way, as in "I used to like their music before they sold out."

The story of [Gentle Giant](#) is a cautionary tale. (my thanks to [Jim Vegeais](#), a superb musician and rock historian extraordinaire, for suggesting this example)

Gentle Giant was the progressive rock band for the true progressive music fan in the 1970s. "The band was always intent on playing music, and playing it as well, as much and in as many different ways as possible.

"Their blend of progressive rock is almost impossible to categorize: jazz seems to be the most obvious of influences, but it's only one of the influences. Their work includes short and long passages of classical, folk, rock 'n roll, even punk. Mixing up medieval ballads and heavy metal, or slick pop with church organ instrumental parts was a regular way of life for them. [They] often made [Yes](#) sound like [The Monkees](#)." [<http://starling.rinet.ru/music/gentle.htm>]



“From the dark [In a Glass House](#), via the much-lauded [Free Hand](#), right through to the essential live album [Playing the Fool](#), Gentle Giant released record upon record of experimental, complex music that fused an eclectic mix of styles and instruments the likes of which have never been heard before or since. Some argue that [Interview](#) was the beginning of the end for Gentle Giant, displaying as it did some of their strangest and most ambitious work...[regardless of its commercial failure] it was an extremely ambitious album, and should be acknowledged as such.

“Fed up with a lack of critical and commercial success, they adopted a much more simplistic style in the hope that it would bring some much-needed cash to the band. The multi-part vocals and wide variety of instruments remained, but the invention was lost in favor of a stab at scoring a hit single. They failed. Three times.

“Though their final album [Civilian](#) was a good attempt at compromise, *it did nothing but further alienate their current, fiercely loyal fans.* [italics mine] Gentle Giant were still perceived by the music press as ageing proggers who'd had their day, and it was very unlikely they would ever make an impact in the charts, no matter how long they ploughed this newer, simpler furrow. Disillusioned and exhausted, the band split up the same year and went their various ways.”  
[\[http://rateyourmusic.com/artist/gentle\\_giant\]](http://rateyourmusic.com/artist/gentle_giant)

## Broken Promises

When fans say that a musician or group has “sold out”, they mean that they believe that the artists have compromised or betrayed their musical values – usually in an attempt to become commercially successful.

Whoa. Let’s rewind that last sentence. “...they believe that the artists have compromised or betrayed their musical values...”

How is it possible that fans, who have never met the musicians in question, come to believe that they somehow know the artists’ musical values? And that these values were violated? How do they know – or what makes them think that they know – the artist’s values?

The answer is courtesy of the artists' **BRAND**.

Do you remember how I ended [my last iSound posting](#)? “If your band doesn’t define its brand, your audience will define it for you...and probably get it wrong.”

Now do you understand why a brand is so important? The Gentle Giant brand was unclear about how the band defined itself, so their fans did it for them. The fans pigeon-holed Gentle Giant as a “progressive rock” band, and defined “progressive rock” to mean “totally non-commercial”. The more that Gentle Giant tried to redefine itself as something broader than “progressive rock”, the more betrayed their fans felt by their broken promise.

“What promise?” you ask. “Who made any promises? Gentle Giant never made any promises to their fans!” No - but their **BRAND** did.



## Core Beliefs

*Core Beliefs are the promises that your brand makes.* These are the most elemental characteristics that define your band as distinct from all others. They are the basic building blocks that form the very foundation of your band. Remove any one of them, and the whole thing comes tumbling down. When you hear about groups breaking up over "musical differences", it usually means that someone wanted to mess with the band's Core Beliefs.

## How to Define Core Beliefs

Your Core Beliefs are "who you are" and "what you stand for." Before you can harness the power of branding, you must define your Core Beliefs. Try sitting around with the rest of the band and ask yourselves questions like:

- **"What type of music do we play?"** This is absolutely vital. The words that you choose to describe your musical taste can have enormous impact on your ultimate success. Call yourself a "tribute band" and you have not only written off any chance of being signed to a record deal, but you will exclude from your audience anyone who doesn't like that artist.
- **"Will we play only originals? Or only covers?"** If you are going to play only originals, you had better be able to write songs that people really respond to.

If not, you could end up facing a choice of angering the true believers by expanding your set list to covers, or by being forced to re-brand the band and walking away from the [Brand Equity](#) that you've built up over the years.

- **"What types of venues will we play at? And what opportunities will we turn down?"** Will you play Festivals? How about Biker bars? Honky tonks? Dance clubs? Would you play a Junior High dance? No...? What if you're offered \$2000 for the gig...?

If your Brand says "we're outlaws who live life on the dark side", and you're caught playing the Hokey Pokey at your neighbor's Bar Mitzvah - you're toast.

- **"What are our musical priorities?"** Is it playing with high energy and passion? Or demonstrating technical prowess by playing challenging works? Is it faithfully reproducing every note of the original recording? Or being able to skillfully improvise and jam? Are we about the music or the lyrics? What's more important: the melody or the groove?

The only right answers are the ones that are right for you. But whatever you decide, you've got to live with those values for the life of your band's Brand. Everything you do as a group - literally **everything** - should be consistent with your Core Beliefs.

Not only will it help to build and keep a loyal following, but it comes with an added bonus by enabling drama-free decision-making ("*We'd love to play your little sister's 12th birthday party - really we would - but it's just not "metal", and that's what we're all about.*")

**Know who you are. Know what you stand for. And stick to it.**