



How Do I Coordinate a Record Release?

It's worth taking the time to co-ordinate all the elements that safeguard sales...

There are no hard-and-fast rules about how to release records: some of the most successful releases are unexpected accidents, records that limped into the shops in haphazard fashion only to find that demand keeps outstripping the supply. Utah Saints' first release was a limited white label pressing; after a week, the distributor came back to them and asked if they would give him some more as the shops were getting a good response. "We thought he'd ask for 50," said Jez Willis, Utahs' front man, "and when he asked for 2000 I couldn't speak!"

If only it were so simple. Truth is, these things are the exceptions to the rule; so let's leave Lady Luck to one side and look at how to make the most of your release. If your record is utterly rubbish, it'll never sell no matter what you do (unless of course you're on Idol-Fame-Brother-Academy or whatever and can rely on hundreds of hours of TV advertising). The only thing you can do is make the most effort to ensure that the right people have the right information at the right time, everyone from your promotions team to the guy in the shop who's going to be selling your release to Joe Punter. The key is organisation. As a label, you have to make sure that everybody is kept informed and that everybody knows to come to you for the information. Moreover, it's keeping hold of the timing that will give you the most control, people get utterly frustrated when a record release is delayed or photos don't turn up on time for the press. Radio stations will often drop a record from the playlist if its release is delayed as they often feel they are being fooled into playing a release earlier than they would have. So...

Step 1 : Assemble The Team

Time: A loooooong time before the release date. Three months is not bad, four months is better. (Yes, that's really how long it takes to do these things properly). Let's assume you can afford everything you need. Stop laughing! So who is on the team?

Distribution Label Manager - the person at your distributor who is responsible for your label and releases. Your distributor is responsible for getting shops to stock and sell your records.

Agent - the person who gets the band gigs.

National Press Officer - tries to get news pieces, reviews, photos and features into the big magazines and newspapers.

Regional Press Officer - does the same but for everything from fanzines to local papers and listings magazines.

National Radio Plugger - tries to get the music played on national radio stations such as Radio 1.

Regional Radio Plugger - tries to do the same, but on the local radio stations.

Club Promotion - if you have the kind of stuff that club DJs need to be plugging (more important for dance music, but can still be helpful to have grass-roots support whatever kind of music it is), certain companies specialise in sending records to a mailing list of DJs.

TV Plugger - if you have a video, someone has to try and get MTV, The Amp, The Box etc to play it.

Street Teams - getting flyers and posters into everything from local record shops to cafés and bars. Generally organised by companies with a very large mailing list of kids all over the country who will do these things in return for gig tickets and t-shirts.

And all this is without even mentioning advertising and fly-posters. If you're going to spend money on such things, you will need artwork ready and a plan according to how much you can afford. So, assuming that you are not a major record label and will not have the budget to do all of the above, you will have to choose the parts of the process that will get you the best return for your money. For instance, if you have a spazz-metal single, chances are that money spent trying to get the record on Radio 1 would be a waste; but there may be specialist rock shows on local radio that would play it, so a regional radio plugger might be a better idea. Horses for courses.

Step 2 : Set The Release Date

Ask everybody how much 'lead' time they need. This is the amount of time before the release everybody needs to do their job. For instance, press officers sometimes need as much as seven or eight weeks, simply because monthly magazines have a long production time - if you want something in the November issue because your release is coming out mid-November, they may need to be servicing the journalists at the beginning of October to make sure it gets reviewed before the deadline. Once you know the date, get a big sheet of paper and draw a horizontal line across it, with the various actions filled in : if you work backwards from the release date, you can fill in the various things that need doing and the dates they need doing. This is usually back-of-a-fag-packet stuff. You aren't trying to make something that you could teach a university course from - it's just something that you can refer to that lets you know whether or not you're going to hit the targets. About now the agent, or whoever is booking the gigs (if you're doing gigs), should be filling in slots on the calendar.

Step 3 : Furnish The Team With Raw Materials

Nobody will be able to work your record without having certain things they need. CDRs of the release, artwork, press releases. Clue: ASK THEM what they need. And then give it to them. Press officers will always want at least 50 copies of the record (and sometimes many more) and these need to be with them as soon as possible - they won't start talking to people unless they know they have something to send out.

Step 4 : Talk To Your Distributor

If your distributor doesn't do the job properly, you are stuffed. You can have all the good press and radio in the World, but if someone goes into a record shop and it isn't there waiting to be bought, you'll miss out on sales. Distributors are full of excuses after the event about why records didn't sell. "Not enough press", "no radio", "not enough gigs around the time of the release" etc etc. So, once again, ask them what they need in advance in order to do the best possible job; if they say they need posters for the shops, give them posters. If they say they need to do 'deals' in order to get the shops to stock more, do what you can. They usually ask for something like 'buy three, get one free' this brings the final price to the consumer down, so the record might get racked at, say, £1.99 for a single rather than £3.99. Distributors also need 'One Sheets' - one sheet of paper with all the relevant information about the release: release date, barcode information, description of the release, details of press and radio coverage etc etc. This is where your co-ordinator task kicks in - if you don't speak to everyone regularly, you won't have the requisite info to fill in.

Step 5 : Keep Talking

E-mails are good, but they aren't enough. E-mails can be avoided. Phone calls are harder to ignore. If it's possible to get everyone around the same table on one day then do it - the more people meet together and speak together, the more enthusiasm you can infect them with. Moreover, their little worlds overlap and it's good for them to swap information on people they have in common. Keep everyone informed of everything that happens - if the record is played on a radio show or featured in a reviews section somewhere, let everyone know. The distributor will want to put it on the one-sheet, the press and radio people will use it as extra leverage for the people who are 'maybe' about the band.

If you do all these things, there's still no guarantee that your record will sell. All that you will know for sure is that nobody can blame you for not doing all you could. Your own timeline / product cycle / back of your fag packet will depend entirely on how many of the team you can afford or find, as well as what kind of music you are dealing with. But don't under-estimate how important this all is. Go on, scribble it down.