

KIDS BUILD IDOLS NOT RECORD LABELS, MARKETER STRESSES

The following story was written by Ron Tepper of the Laufer Co., a Los Angeles-based specialist in marketing products to teenagers. His article is based on his company's research into who exactly is the teenage buyer of products.

Take every possible record market there is and you'll find that the one about which record executives show the least knowledge is the teenage—or so-called bubblegum market.

There is a mistaken impression among executives that so-called teen music (catering generally to the 9 to 17 year old girl) is all manufactured, worthless and short-lived. Nothing could be farther from the truth. Executives feel that teen idols (a la David Cassidy, Donny Osmond) are manufactured and marketed by clever businessmen. Not true. The simple fact is that the teenage girl—unlike her adult counterpart—is less susceptible to hype or manufactured idols than any other age group.

The teenage girl picks her own idol—herself. And, that idol has to fit a certain physical pattern. The failure of record companies to understand this has cost them untold dollars in record production and marketing via such "teen idols" as Jack Wild, Ron Ely and many others.

Unlike creating product for the adult market, teen idol product isn't a crap-shoot at all . . . if a label will give the buyer what she wants and not what the label thinks she wants.

Record companies try to dictate to the teen girls. They try to tell them what they would like. This never works. All a record executive would have to do is read the fan mail that a teen magazine gets each month on the teen "faves" it runs. They would find that Donny Osmond's mail is greater than David Cassidy's and that the Osmond's get more mail than the Jackson Five.

All the letters express a similar need—to be wanted, to be loved, to be understood. That's the audience the record label is dealing with; a lonely one that knows what it wants.

At the Laufer Company we have periodically test-marketed potential "new faves." Those that the kids like will get mail—the others won't, no matter how great the hype is or what you offer them. A teenage girl has a picture in her mind of what her fave should look like. And, you can't dictate that look. Once a teenage girl finds her fave, she'll buy his records, join his fan club, write him letters, etc. However, if he doesn't fit into the "fave look" category, you couldn't give his records away to those girls.

There is no such thing as "generating a demand" for a teen-type artist. Either the kids look upon him as one or they don't and all the billboards, posters and bumper stickers aren't going to change a kid's mind.

The big difference between the adult and teenybopper market is that no reviewer, no matter what he says about an album, is going to make an artist a hit with the teenagers (nine to 17 year old girls). But, if the picture fits—then watch out. You've got a million-seller on your hands.

There is another question often raised by critics of the so-called teenyboppers or bubblegummers. And, that is one of musical ability. Many record executives often put down the uncomplicated, simple love songs these idols sing to their audience.

Another misconception on the part of record industry executives is equating the "bubblegum music" of Buddah Records to the teen idol music of Cassidy, Osmond, et al. It should be pointed out that the two are distinctly different. "Yummy, Yummy" and all the others were manufactured and the groups who sang them were not idols.

In fact, in many cases the groups (such as 1910 Fruit-gum Co.) were distinctly unfamiliar to the teenage girl. Donny, David and Co. are very familiar to the girls, however.

There doesn't have to be any kind of manufactured element in their songs—the girls buy them for their simplicity and honesty and because of the artists who are singing them. This type of product would, it seem, be much more desirable than the former.