

Music: Releases to be reduced

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that the song is "brought to you by" the record company — much as a corporate sponsor would be announced for a commercial break.

Is this a smart way to get music heard? Or will consumers reject a song so tainted by commercialism? Interscope executives wouldn't talk about whether they considered the experiment a success. Similar deals reportedly have been in the works for country radio stations, but none has materialized.

"The idea of a cash transaction for airplay so scares them that they run to other practices that can't be accounted for," said Sky Daniels, general manager of the trade publication Radio & Records.

Murkier methods could be record companies giving radio executives free concert tickets to use or give away, or flying in a hot band to play at a station-sponsored concert — stunts that don't show up on a spreadsheet.

Some companies are bypassing radio altogether and becoming their own music programmers. This summer, Island Records produced a half-hour TV show on two of its artists, Tricky and Pulp, who have achieved critical acclaim but little radio airplay. The show aired on local access cable channels in Los Angeles, New York, Chicago and elsewhere.

Columbia and A&M created their own radio or television shows to spotlight their artists. A&M calls its program "Cafe Sound."

The cable channel Access Entertainment Network was created earlier this year as an outlet for musicians who couldn't get their videos played on MTV or VH1. Record companies flocked to network president Bill Bernard, which he sees as a symptom of their frustration.

"I figured it would be a little slow in the rollout," Bernard said. "I thought we'd have a lot more convincing to do. But the initial response was that this was a great idea."

Access Entertainment Network makes no secret that it's a grand music infomercial. Along with the videos, it contains company programming like "Cafe Sound" for example, and regular shows made by the record chain Best Buy and Spin magazine. So far, it's available only at odd times in about 6 million cable homes.

It's not the only way music marketers have seized

opportunities to expose new music.

Movie soundtracks are almost like mini-radio stations on CDs, and consumers have lapped them up this year. Victoria's Secret and Pottery Barn, retailers not traditionally involved in the music business, sell their own custom compilation CDs.

In true 1990s synergy, Atlantic Records placed some of its music on "Dawson's Creek," the TV serial popular with teen-agers on the WB network, Atlantic's corporate partner in Time Warner. Sales of Edwin McCain's song, "I'll Be," rose dramatically when it was on the series' season finale, Shapiro said.

Atlantic has also signed a deal with the Continental Basketball Association to play its music at arenas. Island arranges to have videos played on television sets stacked up in department stores or in art house theaters before a movie.

"When the audience is sitting still doing nothing but thinking, why not have them listen to music?" Alexis Aubrey, Island's marketing director, said.

Some record companies are also starting to realize that the volume of music they release has become counterproductive. The number of CDs released by major record companies each year more than tripled between 1991 and 1996.

"A lot of people, ourselves included, have followed the theory of throwing stuff out there and seeing what sticks," Aubrey said. "But you have to start streamlining somewhere. We have cut back."

For record companies, the Internet is the new frontier. Some musicians now offer computer-savvy fans a chance to hear new music on Web sites before it's available anywhere else. Atlantic has built a special studio where musicians can perform concerts broadcast on the Web.

Music fans have long used the Internet to produce obsessively devoted Web sites for their favorites, but its use as a marketing tool is unproven. The technology is tantalizing for record companies trapped in a time of transition.

No one knows whether, a decade from now, fans will routinely log on to their computer to hear new music the way they once turned on the radio.

If that's the case, the marketplace could suddenly shift to the opposite extreme: too many choices instead of too few.

For music companies, it's one problem at a time.

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