

Build A String of Smash Hits

A good introductory lineup must be updated constantly for the fans, er, residents

By Bryan Rader ■ *MediaWorks*

I saw Earth, Wind & Fire perform recently at a wonderful outdoor summertime concert. This is a band that has been together for well over thirty years. They were not short on energy, creativity and the pure enjoyment of being able to celebrate their long play list of hits for endearing fans.

How does a band like that stay so relevant for so long? How can it still fill an outdoor venue on a 100-degree night with so many fans of all ages?

Why is this long-term track record important to a private cable operator? We don't record hits, promote albums or launch nationwide tours. But we do try to maintain long-term relationships with our fans.

Too Many "One-Hit Wonders"

Many bands over the years are just "one-hit wonders." They knock out one monster hit, sell a lot of records, create a lot of expectations, and then fall flat on their face when they release their heavily anticipated second album. They end up playing small hotel lounges hoping someone still wants to hear aging rockers bang out their one smash hit.

For every five of these one-hit bands, there is an Earth, Wind & Fire – a band that has stood the test of time. The key for a successful track record over a long period begins with musical talent. But it also includes energy, drive, motivation and freshness.

Bands like Earth, Wind & Fire have recorded many, many albums staying true to their genre of music, and also remaining fresh and relevant. In this case, EW&F has recorded almost 20 albums since 1971, with many achieving gold and platinum status.

They tour regularly, sometimes on the road for months at a time. They stay in touch with their fans through a well-

done Website, and continue to earn great airplay on the radio. They have fans that are getting older *and* younger.

Why is this long-term track record important to a private cable operator? We don't record hits, promote albums or launch nationwide tours.

But we do try to maintain long-term relationships with our fans. You see, when we agree to a ten or fifteen year right-of-entry agreement with a property owner, he or she isn't sign-

ing up for a "one-hit wonder." In other words, owners don't just want a good cable and broadband program at launch. They want to see a string of hits, spread over a long-term period to keep the concert-goers (apartment residents) happy.

Our fans want us to stay fresh, relevant and to display energy and drive, just as the Earth, Wind & Fire fans appreciate the same characteristics of their favorite R&B band. Without it, you never get airtime (more properties) or sell-out concerts (high penetration rates).

The Follow-up

I look back on some of our successful early long-term agreements. In some cases, back in the late 90s, we committed to a customized 50-channel cable package with three analog premiums at a below-market rate. This constituted a great "one hit wonder" at the time.

But as an operator determined to be successful for the long haul, we followed up our first smash hit with a series of other chart-toppers over the years, in-

cluding a 25 channel expansion to the core basic line-up, a high-speed broadband solution, a Spanish tier, a digital product, and a voice over IP service.

And if that wasn't enough, our fans began asking for more hits including an HDTV service, DVR capabilities and faster broadband speeds. So we kept going back into the studio to produce more hits.

Sometimes we top the charts with our new releases, and sometimes our audience does not respond to our new tune. I remember numerous examples of products that we prepared for a particular site that did not do well, either because we misread our audience or didn't deliver what they wanted to hear.

Over the years, I've seen several PCOs make successful debuts with a great new talent and unique product. But none could follow up the initial work, and all eventually fell into the trap of "one-hit" status, ending up in hotel lounges.

The point is, PCOs must look at the life of their agreement as more than a successful launch. They must be prepared to continue cranking out more services, more features, and more products to maintain freshness and relevance for the fan base. Otherwise, they will be out of tune in no time, and miss out on the long-term success of performers like Earth, Wind & Fire.

So try to avoid being a one-hit wonder. Build a collection of "greatest hits," and watch the concert hall fill up.

"Let's groove tonight..." **BBP**

About the Author

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