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[The Future of Product Innovations in Music](#)

Posted on 15. Sep, 2009 by [refe](#) in [INNOVATION](#), [MUSIC INDUSTRY](#)

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During the reign of the CD there seemed to be no need to innovate. For decades that one product brought in plenty of revenue to keep the industry rich. If it's not broken why fix it?

Meanwhile, we understand now that new technologies were quietly transforming the markets. At some point the right time to succeed the CD with an innovative new product (or series of products)

came and went. By the time Napster was established on the scene it was probably too late. An important opportunity was missed because the industry leaders failed to remember that no format lives forever.

On January 9th 2001, Apple – a technology company, appropriately – stepped up to the plate with iTunes. The single track download format quickly began to undercut the CD as iPod sales exploded. By August of this year iTunes had captured 69% of the digital music market and an impressive 25% of all music sold.

Yet despite iTunes' success, the revenue brought in by music and other content downloads is only a small piece of the pie. The bulk of Apple's profits come not from music, but from the device they created to play it – the iPod.

In his [recent music business report](#) for the Forrester Group, researcher Mark Mulligan rightly asserts that “content scarcity is dead.” And while there were many aspects of that report [that I found disappointing](#), Mulligan's perspective on product innovation makes a lot of sense. “Content may be king,” he suggests, “but in the digital age, so is the product.”

As music sales continue to decline it has become increasingly important to find new ways of adding value to the music experience. “The days of the CD or the download being the end of the story are long gone,” Mulligan writes.

The report suggests that the way forward is to create “future music products that blend interactivity, multimedia, multiplatform, convenience, and social to create something totally new.”

There are those who have already begun experimenting in this arena. Trent Reznor developed an iPhone app that helped his fans stay connected to all things NIN. Canadian record label Nettwerk has released ‘Pre-Mixes’ that allow fans to create their own mixes of their artist's music before its official release. An artist named Moldover actually [built a working theremin](#) complete with headphone jack and speaker into the jewel case of his recent CD. Each of these in some way allows fans to engage with the artists' music on a unique level.

Of course, while I think each of these examples is a good one, none of them really reach Mulligan's standard of products so innovative that they are “unrecognizable.” A lofty goal, but I suppose it's ok to take a few baby steps first.

I'm a big fan of innovation – particularly as it relates to music. That's why I started this site in the first place. So when I hear words like “unrecognizable” and “totally new” I get a little excited. However, I also try to take a practical approach whenever possible. I say that because I think it's important to point out that for the average band – even the average record label – creating a truly revolutionary new product is pretty unlikely.

A company like Apple spends billions of dollars on research and development before launching a device like the iPod, or a platform like iTunes, or even a not-quite-revolutionary format like the new LP. You and I can't compete with that. Moldover was able to come up with something creative and execute it well, but it's really more of a gimmick than an innovative product offering.

But that doesn't mean you shouldn't try.

I think that if an artist focuses on the fan engagement piece the rest will begin to materialize. In other words start with the questions, "How do my fans want to interact with me and my music, and how can I make that happen?"

Maybe they want to be able to catch up with you when you're in town for an impromptu jam session. Create a mobile app that alerts your fans when you're in town and let's you post what cafe or bar your at so that they can stop by. Maybe they want to be able get their hands dirty messing around with your music. Build a website loaded with unmixed tracks that they can remix right on the site or download and hack up later. Give them a place to post them and compete to appear as a b-side on your next EP.

I'm sure that you can come up with better ideas than the first three ideas that happened to pop into my head, but you get the idea. The bottom line is that it's time to start thinking like entrepreneurs. Take some risks. Come up with new ways of drawing people to your music and drive some revenue in the process. I can assure you that if you don't, someone else will.

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I really think it already exists, and has for many decades now. It's called vinyl and sales are climbing. The biggest hurdle the hardware adoption, but once that starts to spread, we all know how it's going to ramp up.

I think another major potential problem is the fact that vinyl's "back catalog" is mostly damaged, and expensive in prime condition. But still, for new music, for fan interaction, for art delivery, for tactile involvement, I don't think we'll see anything from Apple or anyone else that matches vinyl.

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16. Sep, 2009

I agree with you that vinyl is seeing something of a renaissance lately, and why that's a good thing. I actually wrote about it a couple of months ago in an article called [Why the Resurgence of Vinyl Could Be Just What the Industry Needs](#).

However, to say that a decades old product (that has plenty of its own limitations, by the way) is any kind of innovation is a bit of a stretch.

As a general rule, I think that it's a good thing for technology to move forward. Just because we haven't seen *the* new format yet doesn't mean that we should stop pursuing progress and actually look even further into the past.

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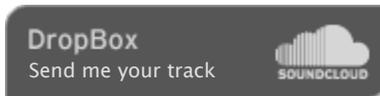
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