

Four Square Studio: Anatomy of a Small Recording Studio's Marketing Tactics

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Introduction

Michael Stevens¹ owns Four Square Studio, a small, single-owner recording studio business in the Nashville area specializing in Christian and Southern Gospel recordings. Stevens has recently made an effort to cultivate his clientele by increasing the quality of clients he records and by focusing on the Southern Gospel and Christian markets. Turning a customer into a client, “a regular, repeat customer,”² has many advantages, including securing loyalty and generating new business.³

However, in the recording studio business, marketing effectively to the desired population is difficult at best.⁴ In the Nashville area, with over 1,500 entertainment industry businesses,⁵ being able to target and convince specific people is crucial because without reaching one's desired customer base, business plans, financing, and competitive pricing are all useless.⁶ It is a job that takes a lot planning, time, and effort,⁷ in a business where people traditionally are more focused on making clients happy with high quality recordings than on targeting their market effectively. To this end, making contacts and earning new clients through interpersonal processes is largely where Michael Stevens has placed his efforts. However, he recognizes that there are other people he should be targeting but may not be reaching. Effective marketing of Four Square Studio to new and potential clients serves to create a base upon which the studio can eventually expand.

In the book *Small Business Management*, David Stokes writes, “entrepreneurs tend to regard market and marketing research as long-winded and expensive.”⁸ However, others (Susan Jacksack, David Cottle, and Christopher Locke, for example) claim knowing more about the size and shape of the market will increase a manager's ability to forecast success. The smaller the business, they claim, the more important that knowledge becomes.⁹ Jeffery Davidson agrees, “there is no substitute for accurately determining who is interested in your product or service, or for assessing the perception of your clients and customers.”¹⁰ This study will consider the

methods Stevens currently uses to market his studio. Based on these findings, and the findings of related empirical research and trade media, the author will suggest how to improve the marketing of Four Square Studio.

Marketing and business research has recently placed an emphasis on small businesses. Stokes tells us, “The small business sector has become of such economic and social significance internationally that its development can no longer be left to chance.”¹¹ Small businesses help with the creation of new jobs.¹² They are one of the primary sources of innovation throughout the world, where independent owners and operators have the freedom to be creative (an especially important aspect in the music business). In addition, small businesses create competition for large firms and other small businesses, too.¹³ For organizations to remain competitive in any market, “All successful business owners must know their markets, competitors, customer wants and needs, and what it takes to be competitive.”¹⁴

By probing into the marketing methods Four Square Studio uses, this study hopes to serve as a basis for further research into the nature and business of recording studios. With a review of academic journals, business marketing texts, and trade media, this study will examine the strategies and relationships Stevens has formed in his business and look for ways to maximize the opportunities Michael Stevens has for Four Square Studio.

Audience Identification

Audience identification is crucial for Stevens to ensure that he makes efficient use of his resources.¹⁵ By creating a narrow focus—rather than aiming for a more general audience—less time and money is spent on attracting likely clients.¹⁶ Specialized communications, newsletters, magazines, television shows, and even trade shows are most often less expensive than general interest promotions¹⁷ while also reaching the people most likely to become customers.¹⁸

Michael Stevens says he feels as if he has a good grip on how to identify and reach his audience:

It’s not so much letting everybody know we’re here. For example, the radio doesn’t work [for advertising]. It’s like spitting on a fish. We try to target our audience. We’re setting up a booth at the National Quartet Convention, for example. We also send out a monthly newsletter via email

to industry people. It contains articles and news about the studio and what is going on in the industry. People come because of the relationships that exist, the knowledge we have, and the experience we have in the business.¹⁹

Stevens' goal is to identify and reach his target audience. He wants to develop marketing tactics to increase his client base.²⁰ The opportunity exists for Stevens to cultivate his clientele and to create a customer base better suited for his business and his expertise. The problem that exists is, how can Stevens use the resources his company has to best identify where he should place his marketing efforts?

The Competitive Environment

Even with a large number of competitors, the market sector Four Square occupies is not as competitive as it may seem. Michael Stevens works at many other studios in the Nashville area and relies on those competitors in a symbiotic way. Stevens maintains these friendships because part of his business comes from the use of those other facilities when a project calls for it.²¹

Alfred Pelham has identified several factors relating to market orientation and business success. Most notably, he reports response time to negative customer satisfaction and product preferences, "immediate response to competitive challenges," and the implementation of strategies that create customer value.²² These findings echo throughout the competitive music industry as well. In a *Mix* article, Dave Malekpour writes, "[Competition is] essentially local. Even if you're a world-class studio in New York or Los Angeles competing for star acts, you're in competition with other New York or L.A. studios for the acts who decide to record or post in those cities. The question remains: why should they choose you over the studio down the block?"²³

Like most small businesses, Stevens does not have much room for error when trying to reach his target audience. "I only have so much room in my budget for marketing my services. A majority of the business' income goes for paying for the equipment and rent."²⁴ Stevens relies heavily upon methods that require less money and more time, such as working with other studios and creating a network of interpersonal relationships. These concepts go along with what Donckels and Lambrecht have noted: that growth-oriented small businesses realize the importance of construct-

ing networks of relationships and contacts, and use networks to their advantage in the marketplace.²⁵

Literature Review

Small business journals and music business trade magazines thoroughly explore the marketing of small businesses in the music business. Pelham reviews the impact of market orientation on the performance of small and medium-sized firms stating, “Market orientation has (one of) the strongest positive relationships with measures of performance.”²⁶ Van Auken, Doran, and Rittenburg as well as Donckels and Lambrecht also assess the way small businesses interact with their community as an effective means of marketing.²⁷ The use of networks and interpersonal relationships by small businesses is a marketing tactic studio owners have used successfully for years.

Rohit Deshpande defines market orientation as the organization-wide generation of information on current and future customer needs, dissemination of that information across departments, and organization-wide responsiveness to it.²⁸ Pelham’s scholarly findings, noted earlier, have been echoed in trade publications as well. Dan Daley has written numerous articles chronicling changes taking place in the Nashville music industry. He describes how marketing and audience identification tactics have entered the recording studio business²⁹ and how the market has affected businesses.³⁰ Van Auken, Doran, and Rittenburg’s research into interpersonal networks investigated effective strategies used by local and regional sole proprietorships by looking at the target audience, available media, and financial resources.³¹ All studio businesses have had to change the way they attract customers in order to continue gaining returns on dollars spent on marketing.

Studio Sound, *Mix*, and *Billboard*—all recording industry trade magazines—have explored the positive and negative aspects of Nashville’s music industry. *Studio Sound* suggests, “there is a massive supply of music projects generated within Nashville...even though most fare dismally in the market.”³² *Billboard*’s Christopher Walsh also adds weight to the issue by exploring the increasingly weak performance of the Nashville recording studio market. He attributes this weakness to the difficulty of achieving long-term recognition and viability with an audience.³³

This literature provides some validation of the problems faced in the Nashville recording community. Michael Stevens could use this informa-

tion to determine how to maximize his resources. The different methods investigated by these articles—trade and academic—are building blocks available to many people in small businesses throughout the world. These techniques can help people gain a competitive advantage in their markets. Studio owners, no matter how well they know their business, or how skillful they are in their practice, always have more information available to them to learn more about their market. This case study will assess the extent to which Stevens has used such literature to guide his business decisions.

Using the available literature, business owners are able to recognize trends in their industry such as the current tendency in many studio markets to create smaller, more personal studios.³⁴ In addition, studios can learn from other businesses how to better identify an audience, how those organizations reach an audience, and how they stay in close contact with clients. The use of networks, as explored by Donckels and Lambrecht (1997) as an example, gives insight as to how small businesses can form associations with similar businesses as well as other people and organizations, in order to keep in closer contact with their market and to keep an eye on the trends in that market.³⁵

Research Questions

The available literature provides directions for exploration into what small businesses can do to attract target audiences and to promote themselves. Trade publications show what the current business landscape is like and what businesses currently do to navigate through difficult terrain. All of the data and information described above suggests several research questions:

- R₁: Is Stevens currently using effective marketing?
- R₂: What actions can Stevens take to reach his target market more efficiently?

This study examines the current marketing practices employed by Michael Stevens and Four Square Studio. Through personal interviews, this case study compares Stevens' techniques with what other small businesses and music businesses do to compete for audiences. It introduces new strategies which will enable Stevens to reach the goal of targeting the correct market for his message. The strategies mentioned will be generaliz-

able; they will be useful to all small businesses in their efforts to attain higher profiles in their markets and to target their markets more effectively.

Present Practices

Michael Stevens uses many sources of information to help him reach his market. When asked about his interpersonal networks, he said, “I rely on my contacts and the people I know in the business to keep me in business. Most of my clients come because of the people that know me and know that Four Square is a friendly place where they’ll get treated right.”³⁶ Working at Four Square Studio as an engineer before buying the business, Stevens was able to immerse himself in the culture of Four Square via the previous owners, who were musicians themselves and had used the studio to produce their own records. Four Square Studio started to become a force in the industry when the owners’ own interpersonal network began bringing outside business to the studio. The original owners built Four Square Studio upon a network of artists and record label executives.³⁷

Stevens, now directing the path of Four Square Studio, relies upon an entire community of people to keep track of the changes in the recording field. He has taken this network and uses it to his advantage. Stevens says, “When I started out as the owner of this studio, it was the people I knew that helped guide me and this business. Without my friends helping me out and giving me lots of advice, I would have had a lot tougher time starting out.”³⁸

For example, Stevens is a member of the National Quartet Convention. He attends its national convention to showcase his services to the more than 40,000 people who attend.³⁹ This practice allows Stevens to meet directly with potential clients. Not all the business Stevens does is in his own studio. “There are over 3,000 studios in the Nashville metro area. I work at those studios too. It’s not a cutthroat competition.”⁴⁰ Stevens works on projects at other studios, large and small, for his clients when the need arises, but does not feel threatened by doing so.

I will do some work at the large studios to get certain things recorded. However, the larger studios do not affect my business negatively. People don’t come to record because of big recording consoles or lots of high-dollar equipment. Plus, I can get most of the same sounds at my studio as they do at the large studios. People come because of the

relationships that exist and the associations I have with my clients.⁴¹

This practice also gives Stevens the opportunity to provide additional services to his clients, such as graphic design for album artwork and compact disc duplication. He takes work that he cannot do in his own studio and outsources those tasks in order to respond to customer product preferences and to create customer value, both ideas Pelham found make for more successful small businesses.⁴²

The interpersonal network of friends within the industry is a necessity on several levels. First, Stevens, as the owner of a sole proprietorship, does business directly with his clients on a face-to-face basis. Many small businesses thrive by knowing people and doing business with people with whom they have relationships, not by conducting business with nameless faces or a mass audience.⁴³ Second, the Christian and gospel recording industry in Nashville is a close-knit group of people who know each other, and relate to each other, very well. The nature of the business is one built on relationships, and knowing whom to call to get the job done. Stevens has been able to build these relationships and use them to gain clients and support his business.

Four Square Studio also uses the internet to reach its market. At www.foursquarestudio.net, people can read Four Square news, view a list of clients, and read the monthly newsletter produced by Stevens. A feature that Stevens currently uses on a trial basis is a listing of the different package deals available. He includes the costs and what is included in the price, including studio time, copies of the final productions, what kind of personnel are included (musicians, producer, and engineer), and the services performed in the process. Stevens says, "The web site is really drawing a lot of attention to Four Square. With the web site, I am able to give each individual person a tour of the studio and the services offered. It's a place where anybody can learn about Four Square, but it's also very personal too."⁴⁴

In addition to the regular packages, the site also offers internet-specific packages at a special discount for those who use the internet to access information about the business. These unique internet-only packages include the more basic services and products, and Stevens uses them to increase traffic to the website.

The monthly newsletter consists of Four Square Studio news, promotional material about recent clients, information to help new clients learn more about Four Square, and a section on current music industry topics such as copyright law. The newsletter goes to clients, people in the business in Nashville, other studios, and those who sign up through the website or other methods.

Another marketing tactic recently initiated by Stevens was the offering of an all-expense paid recording package giveaway. He gave people a chance to enter via the internet or in person at his booth at the National Quartet Convention. Through this giveaway, Stevens was able to collect over one thousand entries, many of which were from people who previously had no knowledge of Four Square. “The package giveaway really opened us up to lots of people that would have passed us by before. Everyone wants free stuff and most people are willing to give a little information and attention to the studio for the chance to win free studio time and services.”⁴⁵ Thanks to this contest, Stevens was able to gain the attention of a larger segment of his target market. The effort was so successful that Stevens plans to give another studio package away in the future.

Redirecting Market Practices

Four Square Studio has several attributes working in its favor. First, research into Four Square indicates that the studio is in a highly valued position due to its history. Very few highly successful artists start studios and then sell them to the studio’s engineer. “Since I was an employee at the studio already, I had a lot of effort already plugged into the studio, even before I bought it,” says Stevens.⁴⁶ What is important is the stock and belief in the product. The National Federation of Independent Businesses claims that marketers must believe in the product they sell to create successful marketing. The research suggests that Stevens needs to remember, “The intangible element that makes a person resonate with a product gives positive momentum to the person selling it. Everyone is attracted to certain types of products. Salespeople who are certain about their preference almost always command greater authority during sales presentations.”⁴⁷

Stevens knows he needs to exploit his company’s position in the market. “Since we focus on gospel music, we know whom it is we’re trying to reach and have the connections in the business to keep with that audience.”⁴⁸ Studies show that this characteristic should remain the cornerstone of Stevens’ marketing practices.⁴⁹ Valsamakis and Sprague suggest a link be-

tween company expertise and customer commitment. The more proficient a company is in dealing with the functions it performs, such as gospel music in Four Square's case, the more commitment customers and clients will have to that company.⁵⁰

Data from sources such as the *Lifestyle Market Analyst* and *Simmons Study of Media and Markets* give us insight into what people with certain lifestyles are generally interested in.⁵¹ The Simmons study breaks down music listenership into categories. One of these, contemporary Christian rock, is a category of obvious interest to Four Square Studio. The Simmons poll shows that people who listen to contemporary Christian rock are most likely to be between the ages of 25 and 34 (index of 171), married, and with children ages 0 to 11 (index of 170). This information can help Stevens define strategies for focusing his message.

Simmons also explains what types of media contemporary Christian rock listeners consume. From this information, one can determine what type of person listens to contemporary Christian rock, and where Stevens should place his marketing efforts. Simmons shows that contemporary Christian rock listeners read magazines like *Inc.* (index of 217), *Audubon* (index of 214), *Country Living* (index of 175), and *Colonial Homes* (index of 161).

We can infer from these index numbers that people who listen to contemporary Christian rock also read magazines about nature, home improvement, gardening, and fine living, as well as small business and finance news. Keeping in mind that Stevens targets local clientele, he will have a greater chance of reaching potential clients by focusing on media with smaller, local circulations that cater to those interests.

One example of this is *The Nashville Digest*. It gives "a daily summary of Music City's top news, business, entertainment industry, and sports stories."⁵² *The Nashville Digest* is an online source for news on Nashville's business and entertainment happenings. Another group that caters to Four Square's needs is *Christian Activities*. At www.christianactivities.com, this Nashville-based website and monthly magazine covers the Christian concert, news, church, and music scenes.

Audience-specific magazines usually have smaller circulations than general interest magazines such as *Time* or *Newsweek*. Smaller circulations often mean lower prices for advertising. Not only is the advertising cost per reader often lower with audience-specific magazines, but the percent

of readers that might be interested in specific services such as a recording studio is much higher than compared to the general public.

The magazines *Singing News*, *Gospel Voice Magazine*, and *Southern Gospel News* are small publications with small audiences, but the readers they do attract are looking for information about southern gospel music. Four Square Studio thrives off of recording southern gospel music. These are ideal publications for Stevens to target.

Another idea Stevens can consider is free publicity in media outlets like *Singing News*, *Gospel Voice Magazine*, or *Southern Gospel News*. Pinson and Jinnett define publicity as, “any non-paid, news oriented presentation of a product, service or business entity in a mass media format,”⁵³ such as a magazine article that focuses on the history of Four Square or stories about the studio, Michael Stevens, or the artists that have recorded there. Stevens should also send out press releases to interested media outlets.

The value of primary research cannot be denied in this situation. Organizations like Simmons, Scarborough, and Dun and Bradstreet give general information that applies to industries or categories of business, but they do not answer the specific questions that primary research can answer. Surveying Four Square clients to learn what appeals to them will help Stevens decide what types of services to keep offering, which services to discontinue, and which services to offer in the future. Also, surveying Four Square clients about their media use will help him decide where to direct his marketing efforts. Asking for referrals when taking a survey is another great way to increase business contacts according to the National Federation of Independent Businesses. “A referral from a friend or business associate is a powerful way to introduce yourself to a prospective customer.”⁵⁴

There are reasons why some people do not record at Four Square, and learning those reasons could help Stevens develop a more effective business plan. If, through his survey, he also learns what people find enjoyable about recording at Four Square Studio, he could publicize this to attract more clients.

The Christian music industry in the Nashville region is very close-knit, and for any business in that market to be successful, personal contacts are a must. Using Four Square’s high profile personal contacts effectively will help on many levels. As noted before, referrals from clients and contacts are a good way to establish relations with new customers.⁵⁵ Using

these contacts to help promote Four Square costs very little but could have a large impact.

Another way of looking at these contacts, or networks, is to see them as “a chain of information along a line of interested people, or ‘getting the word out.’ A network informs prospective clients of your new business through word-of-mouth.”⁵⁶ Stevens can effectively use his contacts in the music business to get the word out about Four Square Studio. When presented with this idea, Stevens commented, “In the music business that Four Square is in, word-of-mouth and recommendations from people I know is a big deal. Some of that occurs already, but not in any formal way.”⁵⁷

Four Square Studio has had the honor of having some of the biggest names in the gospel and Christian music genres record there. Those names have real power in the industry and could help market Four Square to other recording studios and record labels. Stevens says, “I think most people will be impressed with the caliber [of] artists and record labels we’ve had at Four Square. Those artists can really be a great way for us to get our name out to people.”⁵⁸ Officially, it can be difficult for well-known artists to pitch a particular studio to other business people. Deborah Evans Price writes that, “One of the key components of a successful endorsement deal is that the artist and the product they are endorsing are a good fit.”⁵⁹ In addition to artists being wary of endorsing a particular business or product, these deals can be costly for the organization seeking the endorsement.⁶⁰

However, Stevens may be able to use his studio’s star power unofficially. “Four Square already does some of that, actually. There are some clients that are more than willing to give referrals and the like. The way they see it, it helps them get their name out with a quality service, and it helps me get more exposure from being connected with these artists and others in the business.”⁶¹ Cultivating good relationships in the business is important; Stevens can use them as “seals of approval” that will be seen by people at the highest levels in gospel and Christian music. Research suggests that these types of endorsements will boost Stevens’ profile in the industry and raise awareness of Four Square Studio throughout the music business.⁶²

Four Square Studio’s website lists some of the more well-known artists that have recorded there.⁶³ Potential clients can visit the site and decide whether or not to record there themselves. In addition to listing the studio’s equipment, the prices for the different packages, and archives of past newsletters, adding a client testimonial section will make very good use of the

relationships Michael Stevens has developed.⁶⁴ The National Federation of Independent Businesses tells us that, “Whenever you add the personal touch to marketing, you will give an air of unbiased authenticity, and that’s what customers respond to most.”⁶⁵ Telling people that Four Square has satisfied clients, and using referrals to feature specific services,⁶⁶ will make better use of Four Square Studio’s network.

The National Federation of Independent Businesses reports that the internet can reach a target market in many ways.⁶⁷ Four Square Studio’s website offers a lot of information about its services. However, there are some improvements that Stevens could introduce. A good starting point is to view other Nashville area studio websites to learn how they present themselves.⁶⁸ If an idea works for one studio, it might work for Stevens as well.

The National Federation of Small Businesses has other suggestions for website design. Locke says, “You have to get people to care about what you are doing. In every single small business, the owner is making money because he or she has knowledge.”⁶⁹ Stevens understands he needs to convey his knowledge and expertise through his website. “The website is the only place some of my clients, especially the custom projects, look at before giving me a cold call. If I can get even one or two more projects a month through my website, then it’s paying for itself.”⁷⁰ Stevens has also started posting the email newsletters he sends out to Four Square’s mailing list. But other information might also be useful, such as music business news and current events, or stories of how Four Square Studio has helped clients achieve their goals.⁷¹

Conclusions

The current practices of Michael Stevens and Four Square Studio provide a strong foundation but there is much potential yet to be realized. The use of an interpersonal network makes it possible for him to stay in business. However, the literature suggests that Four Square may be able to further capitalize on that network. It also suggests that the use of client testimonials will benefit both the clients and Four Square.

Internet usage by Stevens works to his benefit. Sending out email newsletters takes few resources, yet the exposure to clients and potential clients is substantial. Research previously noted suggests that small businesses are poised to take full advantage of the internet, both in marketing and sales. By combining the efficiency of the internet with the precise tar-

getting of specific media such as *Southern Gospel News* and *Singing News*, Stevens will be able to reach many people in his target market who may not even know Four Square exists. Four Square Studio, like many other small studios across the country, has a lot to offer the music industry. By employing more targeted and creative marketing strategies, Michael Stevens, and hundreds of other small business owners in the music industry, will be able to build more prosperous businesses.

Endnotes

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- ³⁷ Stevens, August 30, 2002.
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