Hi Wayne,

These are all very good questions! I believe these queries can best be answered (and these problems solved) by beginning with a little bit of history about our company and our library, and therefore I will outline it below. I will also outline the gist of the deeper problems we are facing, and some solutions that I suggest for resolving the issue. I’ve been waiting for someone to bring this up, actually, but wasn’t really sure when (or how) it would come to the attention of top management. That being said, let’s get started.

***BACKGROUND***

Our company, as you may remember, RhythmInc, is a mid-sized independent record label that has been around since the early 2000’s. Coming at the heels of the advent of Napster in June of 1999 (as cited in Wikipedia), RhythmInc was originally formed to produce MP3 players, and later expanded to signing artists of their own as technology began to shift towards iPods, larger hard drives, or storage drives, and away from third party pocket-sized MP3 players.

RhythmInc strives to give consumers the best sound quality and listening experience, whether the artist is well-established or a new face in the music scene. We are responsible for many little known artists with cult followings, such as the all-important “I Wish I Didn’t Want to Be with You” by Hallie Markinson, “Walk Backwards Down the Stairs” by The Salty Peanuts, and “What on Earth?” by Argyle Benefactor. Again, I’m sure that none of this information is new to you (or I hope it isn’t!) but a little refresher never hurts.

***PROBLEM***

While we are responsible for a variety of great artists and musical groups, many people (including our employees) don’t even realize that we have an archive onsite! If I had a nickel for every time I saw someone downloading our content through iTunes, Apple Music, or Spotify instead of coming to us, I would probably be rich! This has been a frustration of mine for many years, but I was hesitant to express it for fear of alerting Jack, our CEO, of the very thing that he is now worried about– Why do we have this library in the first place?

There are a lot of complicated factors involved here. The first is the size of our company. Many companies our size require that employees wear multiple hats in order to achieve the day-to-day work required for successful business operations. Although we are a robust, moderately sized record label, we are nowhere near as huge as the likes of Warner Music Group, Columbia Records, etc. Another issue is marketing– while we are extremely excited to advertise new artists and albums, very few of those hits translate into marketing the onsite archive itself, and there is little to no advertising to indicate, even to the artists themselves, whose work is contained within!

The other day, someone asked me about the archive, whom I had never seen before– an employee that works in the sales department. I asked him how he found out, and was surprised to find that there was an Indeed job listing for a library assistant at the archive– something I did not ask for, and had no idea we were even hiring for! Communication is very poor between library management and the other teams, such that even HR and the recruiting team don’t have any clue what we do or what they expected to be hiring for! The job listing is incredibly vague, and the ideal candidate doesn’t even have all the qualities that are required in order to perform the job correctly. It isn’t even a prerequisite to enjoy music!

Furthermore, while much of our music is available online, a huge amount of it hasn’t been transferred to the digital realm yet, causing there to be a huge gap between the amount of content in the onsite library versus the amount of content online. One employee was even upset with me for not pointing out a song sooner that they were very fond of, and became borderline hostile upon discovering that they couldn’t stream the content to their iPhone, let alone find a copy online anywhere at all! If we are alienating our employees this much, think of all the music fans that we are serving in the marketing world that are tearfully clinging to old copies of this music, or low quality radio recordings from yesteryear? A midsized company like ours could easily be a larger company if things like this didn’t happen! If the Salty Peanuts fall down while walking backwards down the stairs, would anyone hear it? Apparently not, and that’s bonkers!

Another huge issue is that even our library department and its employees are incredibly insular. I hate to bring up the stereotype of the standard hipster and their “I liked so-and-so before it was cool” mentality, but unfortunately many of our employees in the archive think exactly this way, and are content to be stingy with any potential hits that others might not be aware of.

There is also the issue of design collateral surrounding the music, such as album covers. For a long time we haven’t had an in-house graphic designer to oversee these issues and to keep our visual album collateral digitized. Many of our original copies are also so faded and low quality at this point that it would be an overwhelming task to update or restore them. It’s almost enough to make me cry!

Finally, (and this is somewhat under-researched, to say the least) we have a great deal of blind and visually impaired fans of our music label! It is safe to say we would have a great deal more, however, if our website and advertising for the onsite archive was more accessible. So, the question is, how do we fix it?

***ANALYSIS***

I’m going to start a bit out of order, and discuss the issue of the insular nature of our music fans, particularly those that work in the archive themselves. Many of our librarians and library assistants are huge fans of vinyl or cassette tapes, and are reluctant to move to a digital landscape, even to try something new. When they are confronted on this issue, they cite the fact that most of the copies of this music are only available through the onsite library or through eBay. The run-of-the-mill employees of the rest of the company, by contrast, are only familiar with our digital resources, as this is what we typically advertise both to the average consumer as well as our employees. There is also the matter of sound quality– many say that the digital copies of our music sounds flat, listless, and tinny-sounding compared to the vinyl tracks. This could just be in their heads, but I doubt it. I’ve given a listen to some of our most popular songs, and head-to-head, vinyl won every time. There were even sounds that I didn’t know were in the original song because they had become washed out in remastering, if they had even been remastered at all before being put online. I read about some similar issues that libraries like ours face in an article by Allison Day that I read recently.

In terms of our online and onsite archives both, we have had little to no user experience testing for these assets. The digital archive available on our website seems almost to indicate that we don’t care if people listen or not, and seems needlessly complicated and overwhelming to use. This has been a source of frustration for me personally for many years, but I wasn’t sure who to speak to about it or how to approach the issue.

A few years ago I spoke to an academic librarian who specializes in these issues, and she told me that even the most heavily researched UX issues are often fraught with setbacks. The university she works for spent a huge amount of money on software that would facilitate user testing, only to find out it wasn’t compatible with mobile devices at all!

We could also theoretically be meeting people where they are culturally, which seems to largely be in vinyl and cassettes. Shockingly (I say this with sarcasm) there are people who prefer to listen to newer music as well as old through records and cassettes, and no amount of coaxing will convince them otherwise. We haven’t released new vinyl of old hits in many years, let alone cassette tapes, and in many cases, these items are still being made. This leaves hardcore fans to fight for limited album copies on eBay and other resources. Is this really the way we want to treat our fans?

Speaking of fans, our blind and visually impaired fans really get the short end of the stick, as it were! The BVI community relies heavily on social media in order to share information, and if our assets aren’t available on YouTube or Vimeo, how can we expect to compete with other record labels? The low quality of the digital copies also means that fans that have sight issues also have to rely on others to tell them what the music sounds like in a non-digital format, which isn’t particularly ideal. Libraries across the country also aren’t allowed to license our assets for whatever reason, and so most (or all) public libraries end up unable to share any of the classics that made us famous. I attached a copy of the article for you in this email.

Finally, it’s clear that we will run into some distinct issues when it comes to digital licensing. Did you know that once an item is put under Creative Commons, it’s considered irrevocable, unlike traditional copyright law? This could create some problems down the line for us if we have already chosen (or choose in the future) to license our music under Creative Commons. What a mess! Yi Ding outlines this point relatively well in an article written in 2013, and I don’t imagine that much has changed since then, as I wasn’t previously aware that Creative Commons was irrevocable, and apparently it isn’t terribly obvious when obtaining a license.

***ALTERNATIVES***

The first step is likely to do user research within the company, and possibly externally, in order to find solutions. Qualitative data would be very important here– which songs are being listened to the most and why? Who listens to them? How do they listen– digitally, vinyl, cassette tape, eight track? A simple poll to the employees would be a good starting-off point, and there could be a prize or raffle for participating in the survey. Once the desire for certain music was figured out at the employee level, this sort of thing could be expanded over time to the average end user.

There could also be an overhaul of the digital library entirely, whereupon all music was transferred to the digital realm. Cost may be a factor in this initially, but it should be a one-time measure that doesn’t need much weeding or monitoring aside from the occasional troubleshooting if a title doesn’t work for whatever reason. Instead of hiring another library assistant that has vague responsibilities, we could be putting this money into user research, and a UX team could be developed over time.

Coordination with an academic library is also important if possible, as too often, special and corporate libraries tend to keep to themselves and don’t communicate with academia, where much of the important scholarly research is located. When I was looking into issues like this regarding special libraries, I actually didn’t find much information at all, except for an article that said that special libraries are often limited in their ability to do quality research due to paywalls. Tara E. Murray went into some depth about why this is the case, and it made me feel a little bit better about my inability to immediately justify our library– doing quality, peer-reviewed research outside of the academic field is hard!

***RECOMMENDATION***

It is for this reason that I have determined that completing some low-cost data mining, like simple surveys, should be our first solution. It is the simplest solution with the easiest and most achievable result. However, if given the option, I would recommend that all of these options be utilized if it is within the powers of the accounting department to make it a reality. Many of these overhauls and improvements would pay for themselves in short order if we were to implement them. Furthermore, involving the HR department and hiring team would be ideal, as it would bring them into the loop about what we even need to see in future library employees. We probably don’t need another holier-than-thou vinyl hoarder in our ranks.

Sincerely,

Rae Eggleston

Library Manager, RhythmInc

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