

Boycotts and What Hip-Hop Can Do

Written by Robert ID1589

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Hadji Williams is author of 'KNOCK THE HUSTLE: How to save Your Job and Your Life from Corporate America' (July 2005). It's hip-hop's first success guide for business, culture and life.

In this excerpt from his upcoming book, Hadji Williams explains why boycotts and what hip-hop and the black community can do instead of boycotts that never seem to work. One case he touches on that brought permanent change is rap artist Ice T's controversial 1992's "Cop Killer" boycott.

Let's Boycott the Boycotts!

How Hip-Hop can permanently change the business world for good.

By: Hadji Williams

I'm not a big fan of boycotts. Why? Because with few exceptions, modern boycotts don't work. Boycotts are inherently temporary: "I march until you listen... I do this until you do that..." Just as consumers have gotten smarter over the years, companies and governments are now savvy enough to call the bluff. They've realized that as long as they control whatever's being boycotted, boycotters eventually have to break bread with them. So more often than not, they just dig in and ride it out.

What scares companies and governments, and most people for that matter, is permanent change. Companies don't fear picket signs and bullhorns; they fear permanent loss of business. Companies don't fear bad quarters they fear bankruptcy. Marketers don't fear trends, they fear fundamental paradigm shifts. Politicians don't fear apathetic voters; they fear voters permanently switching parties or forming viable alternate parties. Governments don't fear protests they fear coups. Californians aren't afraid of earthquakes; they're afraid of the one that turns the City of Angels into the Lost City of Atlantis. New Yorkers aren't afraid of terrorism; they're afraid of Hiroshima II on Broadway & 5th. People fear permanent change. If people think you or your group is capable of causing permanent change in their world, they'll listen to you as if their lives depended on it. Because, figuratively, they just might.

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Looking back, the last truly successful boycott I can remember—and by “successful” I mean that one that brought permanent change—was 1992’s “Cop Killer” boycott. When Ice-T ripped crooked cops and police brutality in that song, police organizations and mainstream consumers and retailers became so outraged that they marched against Time Warner demanding that the song be banned and Ice-T lose his record deal. For months media elites blasted Ice-T and other rap artists at every turn. Time Warner eventually pulled the song and ultimately sold its stake in Interscope (the label that released the song) and has distanced itself from “controversial music.” (For a while at least.)

Now I know what some of you are thinking: What about the HOT 97/Tsunami Song boycott? Yeah, well what about it? What really changed other than firing a couple of low-level on-air personalities? Station-owner Emmis is still making money. They still play music that celebrates misogyny against black women and violence and negativity targeted at black men. In fact, the entire music industry still profits off imagery and lyrics that mainly degrades blacks and celebrates the worst in the black community while marginalizing most every artist and attempt to show otherwise. So again, what’s really changed?

As consumers, voters, and citizens we have to start thinking in terms of permanent change. Whether your goals are lofty (e.g., true equality, world peace, universal education and healthcare) or small (e.g., less bad TV) you need to ask yourself 3 questions: Who is the biggest cause of this problem or biggest barrier to solving it? (2) Who/what scares them most? (3) How do I get a hold of or aligned with it/them? Answering those questions can put the possibility of permanent change on your side thereby giving you the influence you need. Love of change and hatred of complacency are our greatest weapons. Complacency is soft. Love of change means being willing to do what complacency won’t. Remember: The Hustle was built by hard hearts feeding on softened minds and weakened souls.

Now this doesn’t mean go out and buy a Ché Guevara T-shirt, load up on bottled water, Common or Talib CDs, and Michael Moore books and go vegan. That’s just shopping and anyone can shop. And this doesn’t mean violence. Again, violence solves nothing. This is about using your purchasing power, your position as employees and your voice as voters to change how you and your communities are treated. This is about sacrificing, pooling resources, and focusing energy in the name of independence. This is about change.

Capitalism might be the wicked game, but we’re caught up in the

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middle of it. So we better make up our own rules...

The only way to change problems isn't necessarily a violent revolution,

but a revolution in education at least.

—Chuck D.1

You're only a Customer...

One of the first rules in the marketing hustle is to remind the consumer that the products they buy are more than just purchases. We have to convince folks that they're buying "an experience," that they're participants in a brand's growth. We have to convince them that being a consumer entitles them to judge, shape, and even destroy that which they pay to consume. If we don't they won't buy as much stuff; and as marketers, we ain't havin' that.

This is a major reason why they're so many fights at sporting events. Sports fans have been hustled into believing that their ticket entitles them to be more important to the game than they really are. Sports fans are just observers who pay to observe an event. Their \$100 tickets don't give them ownership over any player, team or venue. Truth is they're just renting a view until the game clock hits zero. Period.

But for the last 25 years or so The Hustle has hooked fans into believing that their ticket/merchandise purchase entitles them to moon players, throw stuff at players, sling slurs and expletives at players, spread rumors about players, live out their dreams thru players, etc. And the players, who've long since been repackaged as entertainment product, should just shut up and take it. After all, it's the tickets, merchandising and cable packages and media coverage that pay player salaries. Sports fans are really minority owners (pun intended); and as such they deserve to use their product purchases as they see fit. Right?

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Again, if the game were just a game, throwbacks wouldn't have gone for \$300 and new shoes wouldn't cost \$150. If the game was just a game, advertisers wouldn't sponsor it, and 45 year white men wouldn't worship 22-year-old black boys with 40-inch verticals, .350 battling averages or 4.25 speed. If the game was just a game, it wouldn't sell. And sports is a business and business is all about doing what sells, no matter what sells.

You see this in hip-hop where people buy a CD, some LUGZ or DJ equipment and suddenly decide that they're co-owners of the culture. This is why we hawk Hollywood stars... After all, we bought their movies, watched their TV shows, etc. They owe us the autograph and intimate details of their lives. We're consumers—we paid good money to star-worship; they owe us. And the luxury brand we just overpaid for makes us part of the upscale crowd, doesn't it? I buy the symbol therefore I own what it symbolizes, right? Right.

In the end, it's all just sugar water... it was probably made in Taiwan or Indonesia... and it will eventually end up in a dollar store or on one of those tired "What were we thinking?!" pop culture TV lists. The most revolutionary thing a consumer can do is to buy what you need first, question why you want what you want and always recognize when you're being hustled. And in my opinion, that's more effective than all the boycotts put together.

You're only a customer—

you're walking in the presence of hustlers...

—LL Cool J2

This was an excerpt from Hadji Williams' KNOCK THE HUSTLE: HOW TO SAVE YOUR JOB AND YOUR LIFE FROM CORPORATE AMERICA (Coming AUGUST 2005) It's hip-hop's first success guide for business, culture and life. Email him: author@knockthehustle.com // www.knockthehustlechronicles.blogspot.com

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NOTES

1. Move the Crowd, p. 21 Gregor and Dimitri Ehrlich, (Pocket Books 1999)
2. "Mary Jane" (Remix), Mary J. Blige & LL Cool J (2000)