

Adisa Banjoko Interview with Hip Hop's Clyde Smith

Written by Adisa Banjoko ID3544
Friday, 06 April 2007 07:23 -

Get Your Money On: Int. w/ Clyde Smith of Prohiphop on Urban Marketing.

The blend of technology and art culture's impact on America has always amazed me. With the growth of rap music, suddenly everything from The Gap to Coke to Chrysler used Hip Hop images and artists to push their products. The invention of youtube and ipods only made the ability to market with urban art more creative and exciting.

My favorite site for Hip Hop/Urban business news is www.prohiphop.com. On Prohiphop.com you can learn about what companies are using Hip Hop, how and if it's working for them.

I was able to sit with Prohiphop.com founder Clyde Smith about Hip Hop, urban marketing and who is doing it right.

AB: What gave you the idea to cover the relationship between Hip Hop and marketing and ad trends? Why is that important?

CS: I actually began ProHipHop with a more general focus on hip hop business. Before long it became obvious that marketing was where a lot of the action was happening not just financially but also socially. For example, an ad playing off of a rapper's claims to a violent past may be quite controversial and even get pulled, while the album that established that rapper's persona may be just as controversial in terms of content but remains on the marketplace.

So advertising is often where rappers meet their biggest audience, many of which are not fans, and where they have to respond to something other than record sales. Oddly enough, this situation means that the dialogue around ads and marketing campaigns are often where the deepest and broadest conversations occur, especially if they have a polarizing element.

AB: What campaigns do you think got it right and who just totally did it wrong?

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CS: Two fairly recent examples involving Jay-Z spring to mind. This fall he was part of an excellent campaign for HP in which a number of headless famous people presented their uses for an HP computer.

While both Jay-Z and Pharrell were included, Jay-Z's commercial caught fire in the hip hop scene and got all sorts of folks talking. Now it's hard to know what will do well and what will outperform but HP's people did a great job of picking out celebrities with diverse fan bases and setting the stage for some of the commercials to take on a life of their own.

In particular, the Jay-Z commercial also worked because it captured well-known themes of a larger than life personality at a time when everyone was paying attention and contributed to that process by making both Jay-Z and HP look good. The one big error they made was to not put decent copies of the ads on YouTube. I think the Jay-Z ad would have been even bigger if they'd done that but the agency involved with that part of the campaign seems to have some control issues.

The introduction of Armand de Brignac champagne, a new product that first appeared in Jay-Z's "Show Me What You Got" music video, was the most miserable failure of a launch that I have ever paid attention to. Armand Champagne was created by the folks at 3 Vodka who basically leased the Armand name from French producers Cattier who also supplied the product.

The problem with the campaign was that the marketers lied from the beginning about the product and its value and their lies were quite easy to expose with fairly basic online investigation. I got involved with the ad hoc investigation early on and then went on to track an ongoing series of deceptions.

I'm pretty sure the online exposure, especially at the beginning from a wide range of websites, led to Armand not making a big launch in December as they planned. At this stage, they seem to be keeping things quiet but I think they basically blew the great opportunity that Jay-Z provided at a point when hip hop was kind of looking for a brand to embrace.

I follow Jay-Z quite closely at ProHipHop and the last year or two have been quite interesting, to say the least.

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AB: A lot of people feel 50 Cent kind of reinvented how many ways you could brand things with Hip Hop. Do you agree?

CS: I think 50 Cent got a lot of people thinking about such things because he came into the business with a strong strategy, effective tactics and a willingness to learn and adjust to what he learns. Where other people let the system bring opportunities to them, from endorsements to merchandising, 50 Cent is envisioning a whole range of possibilities to pursue.

He's done a smart job of positioning himself, from mixtapes to cagey interviews, and of constantly expanding his domain. Not everything's a winner but he's obviously not counting on everything to be a huge hit. On the other hand, when one considers the high bar 50 has set and the fact that his credibility is based on music, his albums do have to do extremely well for him to continue at this pace.

AB: What advice would you give a company looking to use Hip Hop music and images in their campaign? Is there anything they should be careful of out of the gate?

CS: There's a lot to consider but it's always important to look at the artist's music in the larger context of the artist's life and career.

So making a deal with an artist because his single's in the top 10 without checking out the fact that he still maintains an active gang affiliation would be a major mistake. While that may sound obvious, some folks assume that hip hop artists always have negative baggage and accept that as a given that they have to put up with, rather than digging deeper.

One of the more startling developments in hip hop has been the emergence of rappers associated with violent lyrics making the transition to family friendly entertainment. Ice Cube's family comedies, such as "Are We There Yet?", have done really well and I would never have expected that from Ice Cube. Snoop Dogg seems to want to make a similar transition but he still seems a bit too closely connected to the streets to go as far in that direction as has Ice Cube. If you just looked at their music, you might think they're pretty similar but Ice Cube is keeping things stable while Snoop Dogg keeps having surprise encounters with the police.

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AB: Snoop Dogg has done an amazing job attaching his name to everything from shoes to cars to dog apparel. Can an artist over do it? At what point should someone like Snoop slow it down? Or is he supposed to just ride till the wheels fall off?

CS: That's a great question. One of the problems with the rap game is the valorization of the hustler and hustlers tend to run things into the ground and move on to the next hustle.

I think a lot depends on the quality of what Snoop puts out. He's connected to a variety of markets so he may well be able to keep rolling if he doesn't oversaturate any of them and is involved with products that fit those markets. So he does hood DVDs for the hood that have a rough quality and dog apparel for a broader but still specific demographic through JAKKS who are mainstream pros. It seems like Snoop isn't going to do one giant thing anymore but is really working multiple niches and doing quite well on the business end.

AB: So what's next for ProHipHop?

CS: A whole lot, I hope. I've got a number of ideas for niche hip hop websites and related projects that I hope to start rolling out later this year. I'm definitely going to continue building out hip hop business related resources and most recently added a Web 2.0-style job board to ProHipHop.

ProHipHop also has a serious contributor in journalist Slav Kandyba who's getting involved with a regular series of posts called Hip Hop

Files. I'm hoping he's the first of what will eventually be a small group of writers involved with ProHipHop.

Though I've managed to accomplish a lot on a shoestring, I'm hoping to figure out a satisfying means of funding some growth without giving up too much of the company. In fact, a lot of what I hope to accomplish this year focuses on building a solid business infrastructure for ProHipHop

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and devoting more resources to things like advertising.

Up till now, ProHipHop's growth has all been organic but I think some well focused advertising will kick the party into high gear once more folks know what we're offering. For example, I launched a site a few months back called Weekly Hip Hop Albums that provides a weekly roundup of each week's new rap releases featuring cd-size cover art for at least 9 or 10 of the releases.

It's actually a really simple but cool site that I think could have much wider appeal if more folks knew about it. And it will actually be kind of fun planning an advertising campaign after spending so much time and energy on Search Engine Optimization and organic growth.

On a related personal and professional note, I'm working on a book proposal related to hip hop business. If that goes well I'll be way too busy but I'll also be opening up new avenues for development and that's quite exciting. I actually connected with my literary agent via ProHipHop so it seems only fitting to do a related book as well.

Beyond that, I just want to stay in the web game one way or another.

I've been totally amazed by what's possible for an individual to accomplish leveraging a laptop and the Internet. Now I'm really looking forward to what will be possible once I build a team with suitable resources and spread the word about what we're doing.

For more info please visit: www.prohiphop.com

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*Adisa Banjoko is author of Lyrical Swords Vol. 2: Westside Rebellion

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