

“A whole other animal:” Challenges and opportunities in vending apparel at festivals

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Introduction: Festivals are public events held during a certain time period in a specific location (Wilson, Arshed, Shaw and Pret, 2017). Most commonly, they focus on a theme pertaining to the arts, a culture, or a region that appeals to prospective attendees (Johansson and Toraldo, 2015). Festivals generally include a variety of vendors selling merchandise and interacting with customers. This channel can allow companies to increase their revenue stream by selling and marketing their products in a unique retail environment.

Previous research has primarily explored the economic and social impacts of festivals on local and regional communities (Kim, Han and Chan, 2008; Litvin, Pan and Smith, 2013). Studies focused on festival visitors have investigated motivations to attend (Way & Robertson, 2013), shopping behavior (Kelly and Robertson, 2014), and willingness to pay for merchandise in a festival setting (Dodds, Jenkins, Smith and Pitts, 2018). However, research studying festival exhibitors, specifically festival apparel vendors, is limited (Wilson et al., 2017) and warrants more exploration. The purpose of this study was to examine one apparel company’s experience with vending at festivals and provide insight into the challenges and opportunities of selling apparel at festivals.

Case Company: The case company of this study is Unalome Designs, identified with permission of the company’s co-owners (K and M). Unalome is a Rhode Island-based women’s clothing company, making sustainable, hand- and natural-dyed apparel aimed at “gorgeous goddess-customers” (Unalome, n.d.). They have an e-commerce website, but their primary retail channel is music festivals. In vending through this unique outlet, the stakeholders had much success but also faced many complications.

Method: To thoroughly examine the unique issues surrounding Unalome Designs, a case study method approach was selected as the best fit (Creswell, 2007). Data was gathered through multiple sources, including in-depth interviews with the co-owners over a two-year period, the company website and social media accounts, and festival documents. Interview transcripts were read and analyzed by both researchers, first independently and then together, negotiating all disagreements until consensus was reached. Through data analysis, reliance on festivals as a retail channel was uncovered as one “key issue ... for understanding the complexity of the case” (Creswell, 2007, p. 75). Subthemes relating to the opportunities and challenges of retailing at festivals are addressed in the next section.

Findings: Music festivals, as M said, are a “whole other animal,” one with distinct opportunities that require significant planning and commitment. The owners found them to be a lucrative channel for Unalome where they could “just rake in the money.” Additionally, K and M frequently discussed the fun of retailing at festivals. At one, K and M “brought chalk and did hopscotch in front of the booth, and we were the crazy hippie girls dancing in front of the booth.” The channel also provided an opportunity to connect personally with target customers. As M said, “I pinch myself all the time that this is actually my job, that I get to go see my favorite bands play outside and sell clothes and watch all these women dance and love our clothes and swoon over them. It's a dream come true.” Unalome also experienced a “big surge” in social media followers after each festival, which led to additional e-commerce sales. Vending at festivals was not only fun and profitable on its own but generated increased sales for their other channel.

There were also substantial challenges, beginning with which festivals to choose. Each festival is distinctive, in a different location for different lengths of time (from one day up to one week; from 6-hour to 15-hour days). They each have unique target consumers varying in number (Unalome vended at a festival with an anticipated audience of 500 people and another expecting 20,000) and in characteristics. For instance, some are for “the younger kids who are camping in the woods and looking to party” (M) and some have “an older clientele” (K) who focus on yoga and fair trade. In addition, festivals charge vending fees that could be several hundred or several thousand dollars. With each criteria, M and K must determine if the festival made sense for their small business. If it did, they submitted an application for acceptance, which was by no means secure. Other challenges included pre-planning details such as what vending supplies were needed (e.g., booth walls, lights, hangers, racks), staffing at the booth, and what merchandise to bring. K said their choices depended on “the festival that we're going to, and the type of music that's there, the type of people that's there, the type of stuff that we've been selling the most of recently, and what colors we've been selling ... There's a million factors that go into it.” Once at the festival, there were unexpected challenges, like a lack of promised electricity, a lightning storm, or racks that fell over into mud. The owners realized vending at festivals was uncertain, which led to stress and exhaustion, only sometimes counterbalanced by the fun.

Conclusions and Implications: The findings from this study contribute to understanding the challenges and opportunities for selling apparel merchandise at festivals. In today’s complex retail environment where brick and mortar stores are shuttering and online sales are flattening, this study offers brands insight into a unique retail channel, music festivals. This little studied retail outlet provides a potentially new/untapped revenue stream for apparel brands looking to increase sales and broaden their marketshare, yet companies interested in this channel need to prepare for the complications that come with it.

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