

The Background Debate: Is It Music, or Is It Noise?

By Stephen O. Frazier July 9, 1998

People who complain about loud background music in public places are often written off as crackpots by business owners. In their view, the music is having a good effect on the customers. If everyone does it, it must be a good thing, right?

Not necessarily, particularly if the music is fast, loud, and vocal. One person's music is another person's noise. Some would say any background music is a waste of money. Loud, fast music will certainly annoy or alienate many who hear it.

Many studies worldwide have substantiated these objections and they establish that background music is not always effective or pleasant.

Consider:

- ◆ Many people don't notice background music. A study at London's Gatwick Airport found the bulk of the passengers passing through the facility were not even aware of the soft background music. Then why waste the money on music? A majority of those who were aware of the music objected to it.
- ◆ The music may not affect purchasing habits. A supermarket study published in "Yearbook of the German Society for Music Psychology" found that customers bought no more in a store, nor did they stay any longer, when music was being played than when it was turned off. In fact, a 1982 study published in the Journal of Marketing indicated that loud, fast music decreased the average time customers spent in a store, and they bought less. Inappropriately loud or ill-suited music may even create an avoidance response, deterring customers from businesses, according to yet another study, this one from the Journal of Applied Psychology.
- ◆ Tunes may not soothe people waiting in line, either. Researchers observed the patrons of a popular and busy Houston restaurant, where people often had to wait 30 minutes for a table. They concluded, in a 1984 article in the Journal of Consumer Research, that more people left during the waiting period if the music was loud (but not blaring) and fast.

All of these studies were done by professionals using groups of 500 to 50,000 people. They would seem to indicate that, at best, the value of background music is questionable. It may even be an unjustifiable expense to a business.

Still other research has shown that this music actually creates serious problems for up to 20 percent of those over 40 - the most affluent clientele - particularly if they have hearing problems. A study in the Journal of the Acoustical Society of America indicated that if background music is present, these people may not be able to carry on a conversation or make a purchase.

Hearing aids, unfortunately, amplify both conversation and the music. This is a situation where background music undoubtedly does create an avoidance. Many restaurants, malls, and shops are shunned by these people because of loud music.

A University of Texas researcher surveyed the managers of 52 retail stores of various types. In an

unpublished paper, he notes that 76 percent of the managers felt customers bought more when there was background music and 82 percent felt the music had a positive effect on the customers' mood. When asked, however, what facts or figures they could produce to substantiate their beliefs, they had none.

Recalling the Gatwick Airport study, if 80 percent are not aware of the music and the majority of the remainder object to it (plus, we can factor in the hearing impaired who may be avoiding an area because of the music), possibly businesses would be well advised to reevaluate this expense

If, after doing so, they still feel music has some merit, they should at least carefully scrutinize the volume, tempo, and presence (or absence) of vocals.

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