

ASCAP: Dedicated to Exceeding Expectations

By Crystal Caviness



Service is the key word at ASCAP, The American Society of Composers, Authors and Publishers, where senior management keeps the focus on its songwriter and publisher members when discussing the 93-year-old organization's goals. "ASCAP is the only performing rights organization in the United States that's owned by its members," said John LoFrumento, ASCAP CEO. "We never have a conflict in our business objectives, because we're negotiating on behalf of our songwriters and their publishers."

More than 300,000 songwriters and publishers - Beyoncé, Kenny Chesney, Alan Jackson, Jay-Z, Dave Matthews, Brad Paisley, Rascal Flatts, Sugarland, Justin Timberlake, Diane Warren and Stevie Wonder, to name just a few - have elected to make ASCAP their PRO.

Providing advantages for its members and positioning the company to most effectively represent their interests is the core of ASCAP's mission, according to LoFrumento.

These advantages range from providing competitively priced insurance to proactively fighting piracy - the illegal duplication and distribution of licensed content that plagues the entire entertainment industry.

"Piracy doesn't impact ASCAP directly as an organization, but it impacts our members who are entitled to a public performance royalty, which ASCAP provides," said Phil Crosland, ASCAP Executive VP / Chief Marketing Officer. ASCAP leadership spotted a problem in the anti-piracy campaign headed by the Recording Industry Association of America, in which fining random illegal downloaders made front page headlines and did little to improve the music industry's public relations.

"No one was addressing the educational component," said Crosland. As a result, ASCAP decided to research how it might make a difference in correcting the problem.

And so ASCAP joined earlier this year with iSafe, a nonprofit program funded by Apple, Microsoft, Verizon, the United States Department of Justice and others, to launch an anti-piracy road show that's expected to reach more than 2 million junior high school students by the end of 2007.

This one-hour presentation is now being offered at school assemblies in an effort to dispel myths about illegal downloading and provide overall Internet safety information.

For the anti-piracy section of the show, Crosland and his department created Donny the Downloader, an animated teenager who learns the truth about illegally downloading music.

"Donny tells the story that when you download music illegally, you're hurting a lot more people than you think," Crosland said. "Donny is based on the insight from kids who think they are hurting only the artists who are already in the back of a Learjet, drinking champagne."

Donny is succeeding. Seventy-three percent of teens surveyed after experiencing the Donny the Downloader segment said they are less likely than before to accept downloaded files from friends. And 66 percent indicated they are more likely to use legal sites for downloading music.

Despite these impressive results, Crosland is realistic about the magnitude of this challenge. "Intention is one thing," he pointed out. "Actual behavioral change is always a challenge, but you have to start with kids believing this is new

information."

In another move to address an area of concern for music creators, ASCAP joined with the insurance company Sterling & Sterling in 2000 to form MusicPro Insurance. The program offers high-quality coverage, ranging from equipment rental insurance to long-term care, to everyone who earns part or all of their income through music. Rates are competitive, and the service is not exclusive to ASCAP members.

Details are available at the benefits page of the ASCAP Web site.

Guided by what LoFrumento called the "business mind of publishers," ASCAP formed a joint venture four years ago with Connexus Corporation to create Mediaguide, a digital tracking service that provides real-time performance data in the United States, Africa, Asia and Europe. Mediaguide tracks approximately 3.5 million radio performances of songs per week and in excess of 80 million ad detects per year.

Operating independently, Mediaguide provides ASCAP with data for determining royalty distributions. It also serves clients who may use the information to track advertising placements, consumer trends and for other purposes, according to Mike Sistas, ASCAP Director of Membership Relations.

Mediaguide differs from Broadcast Data Systems (BDS), Mediabase and other tracking services, he said, because it was tailor-made to track the information ASCAP desires, rather than execute random surveys.

"Mediaguide tracks twice as many Country radio stations as any other tracking service in the United States," Sistas explained.

"The good news about Mediaguide is that it is a profit-making company," LoFrumento added. "The profits we are getting will be used to lower operating costs, and that will morph into distributions for our members."

ASCAP has implemented other ways of growing the careers of its members, including the I Create Music Expo, now in its second year in Los Angeles. "We bring together the best of ASCAP's members into a panel to help in career development for our members," Crosland said, adding that the seminars are also open to non-members.

More than 1,500 music creators attended the inaugural Expo in 2006. That number rose to exceed 2,500 in '07, with 250 speakers that included Hal David, Jimmy Jam, Randy Newman, John Rich, ASCAP President and Board Chairman Marilyn Bergman and other ASCAP notables.

On the Web: www.ascap.com

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