

Getting In Sync With The Industry

4 Music Licensing Strategies for Musicians



By Kyle Hunter

“There’s no business like show business”, classic film title/theme song (1954) — Irving Berlin, songwriter, composer, and lyricist. His words then are very much relatable to the music industry today.

Disruption in the music “record label business” has forced the transition to emphasize streaming and alternate forms of revenue. Record labels struggling to reinvent and remain relevant have concocted 360 record deals, ramped up music streaming, increased touring revenue, and music licensing. Music licensing has been around for decades and is certainly not anything new. Licensing essentially is the fee/royalty revenue stream for music placement in movies, video, cable, television, and product advertisement. As a revenue generator licensing can be highly lucrative and yield a significant monetary return.

How does an independent musician compete amidst a sea of major record labels pitching their musicians for the same placement opportunities. An independent musician can find themselves often feeling overwhelmed fighting against a large machine with millions of dollars in financial backing. It’s like the equivalent of David and Goliath, contemplating how do you conquer a problem this big. With over a decade of experience within the industry, I’ve compiled some useful and helpful tips to assist composers in their quest for obtaining the ever allusive music placements.

The first and most critical component is originality. Be yourself to free yourself. A term I once heard an A&R say during a meeting with an aspiring musician: “ *In a world that is full of copycats, it’s best to be an original*”. The words are timeless, and every musician needs to find her/his unique voice.

I’ve heard countless demo submissions for music pitches, and what I find to be a consistent turnoff the music sounds the same. I’m looking for musicians who stand out, those that dare to be different and unique. It’s alright to borrow from the style of other musicians, but only up to a certain point. Make sure that you find your unique voice and musical identity so that your music stands out and noticeably different in a distinct way. Is the song unique, does it touch an emotion, and are the lyrics your best literature? This will undeniably help you find a lane that you singularly own. I’ve always adhered to this philosophy and it ultimately landed me one of my biggest placements. I crafted a song entitled *‘Everywhere’* and essentially stayed true to myself as a musician. The methodology utilized was to emphasize content-driven lyricism over hard-hitting production from producer Navi Beats. Ultimately that same song landed a successful placement on the STARZ network series 6 season premiere of the show *Power*. In hindsight, if I would have tried to copy other musician’s formulas, would my music have stood out and been selected? Probably not. In the end, it always proves the most beneficial staying true to your voice.

Collaboration Is Greater Than Competition

I've realized that it's critical to recognize the importance of teamwork. When attempting to break into scoring music there is no singular approach that works. But most importantly working with and collaborating with other musicians can expand your potential reach. I've had experiences while working with other talented musicians whereby we were able to successfully compile contacts and land placement opportunities we originally would not have been able to acquire by ourselves. Strength in numbers is key, so actively network, join forums, and build relationships. Your network undoubtedly determines your net-worth in this industry. Expanding your connections will, in turn, expand your opportunities. Speaking from experience I collaborated with music producer Es-K on three musical compositions. Those same three compositions ended up being featured in The New York Times 'The Outlaw Ocean' music series based on the novel from Ian Urbina. It garnered significant traction and subsequently opened up additional opportunities. The novel was picked up by Leonardo DiCaprio and Misher Films to be produced for Netflix. Collaboration is greater than competition.

Bad Mixes, Ruin Great Opportunities

Music Supervisors are extremely particular when looking for amazing music. Deadlines are in place and the music that is selected has to not only be the right fit but also sound great. It's disheartening when finding that dynamic song that is perfect for a film, but unfortunately, a terrible mix can negate all of that. It's best to ensure that the sonic quality of your musical composition meets the industry standards. I always encourage musicians to make sure that they have mixes that meet industry standards. A phenomenal mix can provide a competitive advantage, and often be the determining factor between your music being selected over other musicians. I recall listening to over 45 song submissions for a particular placement. I came across a record that had the perfect message and vocal performance was amazing, but unfortunately, the mix of the record was not acceptable. The time constraints we had for the project were on such a short turn around that there was just not enough time to request the musician obtain an alternate mix. Unfortunately, we had to move ahead, and the musician missed out on an excellent opportunity to earn a 15k sync.

Keys Open Doors

Once you have your music recorded, mixed, mastered, and ready to go it's time to be strategic. Conducting outreach, and making successful connections with the gatekeepers. Most musicians ask how do I make contact with music supervisors. Most music supervisors are very good at keeping their contact information off the internet, it's essentially like mission impossible trying to make a connection. Additionally, another challenge is trying to determine who to contact altogether. When I first started in the industry years ago I utilized a tip that helped me. One day I watched a movie and at the end when they started to roll the film credits the music was amazing. It was so great that instead of leaving the theatre I continued to sit and watch the credits. After a while, I noticed in the credits it stated 'music supervisor ' and stated the person's name. I realized that in the credits they state who the music supervisor is and that changed my perspective. From that point moving forward I would always make it a point to observe and be cognizant of the credits at the end of a movie, and or go to film websites to do my research. After obtaining the contact information I would be certain to do my homework in regards to the music supervisor. Such as what types of musical genres are they most known for, and which songs of mine would best fit their creative direction. After that point, I would reach out and make connections. Some would work, while others wouldn't, but the main point is that I had cultivated a strategy for reaching out, and that was key. Knowledge is not only power but essentially the key to opening doors and fostering fundamental relationships.

Can I Get Your Number?

A final key component that can help musicians in the world of music licensing is ensuring that their contact information is readily available online. Music supervisors are extremely busy and receive tons of music. I've received hundreds of music submissions and downloaded seemingly an immeasurable amount of content. Subsequently, sometimes several months pass, and if the metadata is not fully complete for each song it can become hard to get back in contact with musicians. Often we go online and attempt to locate musicians but they will have outdated contact information, telephone numbers, or an email address. The vital contact information is not maintained and updated.

Musicians must ensure they have current contact information readily available. When opportunities arise they are reachable, ready, and able to take full advantage of all opportunities. So the next time you complete a fantastic musical composition ask yourself is your contact information current and up to date?

In conclusion, music licensing is extremely competitive, rewarding, and certainly not for the faint of heart. To be successful in this industry it requires talent, persistence, and patience. With over a decade of experience within the music placement industry operating my company Rhythm Couture, I've realized that only truly the vigilant, talented, and those with tenacious work ethics succeed. In all things, persistence wears down resistance, and the salient points previously discussed can assist any musician. Stay focused, create compelling content, and ultimately you will achieve your goals within this business.

Article By

Kyle Hunter is the Chief Executive Officer and Co-Owner of Rhythm Couture. He is an experienced television and film composer that has scored music placements for the STARZ television series Power, The New York Times, Calvin Klein, Forever 21, Porsche, VICE, Monster Energy, Powerade, Les Mills, VANS, Wix, Stetsom, and countless others. For the Complete Music Licensing Blueprint visit <https://kylehunter.podia.com/the-music-licensing-blueprint>