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TALKING 80S: AN ONLINE BRAND

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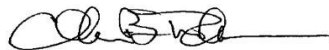
Charles B. McPherson

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master of Science in Digital Content Strategy
at
Lindenwood University

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Charles B. McPherson



Author

Andrew A. Smith



Committee chair

Dr. Jason Dude Lively



Committee member

Justin Kussman



Committee member

TALKING 80S: AN ONLINE BRAND

A Project Report Submitted to the Faculty of the Art and Design Department
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
Degree of Master of Science
at
Lindenwood University

By

Charles B. McPherson

Saint Charles, Missouri

May 2019

ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis: Talking 80s: An Online Brand

Charles B. McPherson, Master of Science/Digital Content Strategy, 2019

Thesis Directed by: Andrew A. Smith, Professor

This project focuses on the organic establishment of an online brand, from conception to execution. The primary focus is the steps taken to establish an online brand. The aim of the project is to discuss the results of steps going into the brand creation, what worked and what did not work. Furthermore, the project discusses possible solutions to avoid potential issues and problems in brand creation.

Dedication

This project report is dedicated to my wife, Alicia, and my sons Ian and Patrick.

Over the course of the last two years, I have not always been readily available as a husband or father due to the work in which I have dedicated to this degree program. This paper represents the culmination of my pursuit of a Master of Science degree.

Alicia, no more seeing the back of my head at the table as I work on papers.

Ian and Patrick, I want you to know that a person is never too old to learn. If your dad can do this at age 49, you can do anything in the world, and I hope you never stop working to better yourselves.

Above all else, I love all three of you. You are my world.

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Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my committee, Andrew Smith, Dr. Jason Dude Lively, and Justin Kussman for the knowledge, hints and tips throughout the process. Andrew, I especially want to thank you. You have been one of my professors during every semester of this program. As a student, I have enjoyed your classes and insight. As a friend, I have enjoyed our talks even more, and I hope they continue.

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Introduction

Social media has moved from an occasional activity to one that most adults engage in daily (Smith and Anderson, 2018). Ideally, a brand or business will have a tangible product to sell. Whether that is a factory selling goods to a retailer or a local photographer who photographs families, the creation of a social media presence is essential. This thought process goes back to the 1990s, when successful websites usually had strong involvement from the chief executive officer of the company. The involvement of the CEO enabled consumers to have the feeling that their concerns, compliments, and complaints were being heard by the person in charge. This thought process played into the psyche of the consumer and built good will between the consumer and the company (Yan, 2011).

This report will focus on the establishment of Talking 80s, an online-only brand. While the Talking 80s media brand does not sell a tangible good, it does provide a service for Generation X, defined as people born between the years of 1965-1980, by providing a way to revisit their youth. Nostalgia is a strong emotion and a strong motivator. Reliving their youth, oftentimes the most “fun” period of their lives, can produce incredible memories and give the consumer a reason to interact with a brand, website, or physical product.

The goal of Talking 80s is to create the awareness of the brand by bringing topics of interest related to the 1980s into the forefront of social media. By establishing a familiar type of content with the social media brand, the brand strives to build the good will with its audience and establish brand loyalty. This revolves around brand awareness, brand image, perceived value, brand community, and brand trust. (Awad and Fatah, 2015).

Social media is important to any brand. As of 2014, 91 percent of all businesses were active on two or more social media channels (Colicev, 2018). Participation in social media is not only increasingly important to brands, but essential, and some would argue mandatory. Over three million Facebook posts are generated per minute (Zaccaria, 2019). This is where Talking 80s has tried to excel in its strategy; focusing on the social media to increase awareness before its World Wide Web appearance.

Many steps were taken to establish the identity, the content, and the mission of Talking 80s, attempting to make it a viable brand using only organic means. The report will detail the steps taken to establish the brand, including research, as well as discuss the content, voice, tone, and the eventual establishment of a website. However, some say that since users are predominantly on social media channels like Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and YouTube, the interaction should increase and occur on these platforms (Cheregi, 2018). Some of the reasons for this include the low cost of social media, quick feedback from followers, and the ability to reach a large amount of people in a short period of time (Cimcek, 2018).

Brand Awareness

Beginning brands should utilize their owner's social media network of friends, family, and acquaintances to help spread the word about the brand. This is the approach taken by Talking 80s. As the brand has slowly gained an audience by organic means, people in the network have engaged with the channels, shared the channels, and sent recommendations for the channels. Since the content is public, it often shows up on the social media channels of people who are not aware of the brand whenever there are moments of engagement with people who interact with the content.

Twitter is a powerful tool in making a brand recognizable. Talking 80s has utilized this tool, and it has experienced an influx of engagement from a variety of countries thanks to utilizing the power of keywords and hashtags. These keywords and hashtags are strategic in nature, meant to increase the engagement of the posts, which in turn, increases the awareness of the brand. This will be addressed later in the report.

Brand Image

When creating a brand, one must first define the product. Defining the product requires analyzing other websites and social media channels in the areas in which the brand will focus and emphasize, including looking at their content, and looking at their names and logos.

Research and analyzing the kind of content the brand will provide is important. When the content is defined, a name should be chosen that will emphasize the product, featuring the topic within the name, if possible.

When researching what the brand will stand for and deliver in terms of content, brainstorming ideas is pertinent to the successful naming of the brand. This includes generating a short list of names and beginning the research into the availability of the name. Ample research on social media channels, including Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat, YouTube, and Spotify is required. The goal of most brands is to generate engagement that will generate income, and that requires monetizing content. Purchasing a domain name and securing hosting that meets the needs of the plans of the brands is of utmost importance. Research should always include scouring domain name registrars. Each registrar in the business of selling domains has a search engine that enables a consumer to search for and buy a domain name as easily as possible. Potential brands should look for discounts on services to utilize, including free hosting

opportunities, email, and other add-ons that a brand can use for the initial contracted term of web hosting.

A burgeoning brand needs to get the opinions of a focus group of some sort. Brands with a large budget may be able to afford a formal focus group put together in a conference room or a laboratory. In most cases, however, people behind the brands can use the opinions of friends and family. Brands should garner opinions about the name from trusted confidants. Some domain registrars will let you not only see its availability, but its value. Purchasing a domain for a year is a great way to test the waters of a brand without a significant economic investment. Automatic renewal is an option one should consider. Domain squatting and charging increased amounts for a domain was once, and still can be, a common occurrence, so spending a small amount for an automatic renewal is a safeguard against potential marketing disaster.

After procuring the essential digital names and spaces, launching a brand is the next logical step. Besides the name, the public face of the brand needs an identity, which means designing a logo.

While building a brand, it is smart to “leave everything on the table” and brands should keep an open mind while evaluating its next steps and ideas. Utilizing free resources, like the website 1001fonts.com, can be a cost-saving measure. When designing logos, licensing should always be in the forefront, and using commercial-free fonts that will allow for designs to be created to use on merchandise or graphics that may be used on a monetized website is important. These licenses can be found on the download site or within a “Read me” text file available with the font. There are hundreds of fonts available for free. While searching for fonts, brands should always have a look in mind.

As a brand based on content from the 1980s, Talking80s needed to have a retro look; something that would immediately convey the 1980s. When designing a logo, inspiration can come from a variety of places. The Talking 80s brand discusses music, movies, and television of the decade. Searching for stylized print ads, television, and even movie posters were scoured and investigated for inspiration.

The research for Talking 80s included researching imagery that evoked the 80s feeling that the brand intends to portray online. When having several options on the table, deciding on a look can be difficult, but is among the most important decisions a burgeoning brand can make.

Audiences associate brands and communities with many strategies in social media, including imagery. These images can communicate the brand using “visual identity touch points” that establish the brand’s identity (Watkins and Lee, 2016). Brands should use any inspiration possible, including personal memories. When looking at designing a logo, color choice is important as well. Invoking the memories of the 1980s with an “iconic” and distinct look is important for Talking 80s. Using stylized colors and fonts that evoke that retro feeling was important for the brand.

The original inspiration for the Talking 80s logo was inspired by neon lights and retro grids popular in the decade. The colors, hot pink and neon blue, coupled with a random geometric shape and the grid provided the first logo draft (see fig. 1). As the logo was placed into social media channels as a test, the look was not what was desired. This led to more brainstorming and a personal memory.

Inspiration for the final Talking 80s logo was a bumper sticker the brand creator saw in 1986 which was inspired by the style of the television show *Miami Vice*. A logo with dark blue,

teal, and hot pink was created (see fig. 2), and it has become the identity. The bright colors catch the eye on social media, which is by design. As people scroll through social media channels, the bright colors make it more likely someone will pause to see the content.

Using the same logo across each social media channel, as well as on the website, is important. By using the same logo, an element of personal branding is established for the Talking 80s brand (Instablogs, 2017), which also allows for a bright and visible thumbnail on channels like Twitter. Additional images were created for areas of the Talking80s.com website, including one for television (see fig. 3), movies (see fig. 4), and music (see fig. 5).

However, a brand is not just a logo or a slogan for the brand. It is the user experience on the website, the most valuable piece of digital property a brand can own. The website is the next phase of the overall project. This includes the speed and ease of navigation for a website that is tied into the content strategy of the brand (Barbour, 2018). Budding social media brands should keep in mind the type of site desired. In the case of Talking80s.com, a Wordpress theme built for blogs was chosen. Each post is tagged with keywords, which helps with search engine optimization (SEO) and site organization.

Perceived Value

When a brand chooses its name, as mentioned before, one should be mindful about the monetary value. This value is what the registrar believes a registrant could charge for the domain should they want to sell it to an interested buyer. Make sure that your brand name makes sense with your product.

By naming the brand Talking 80s, it implies the content of the social media channels and the website itself; these are the things which played into the naming of the brand. The brand,

simply put, talks about the 1980s. It is the ultimate example in “truth in advertising.” Consumers like the accounts or channels because they know what they are getting. They are getting factoids and current news as related to 80s-themed content in a timely manner without politics, without personal views, and without bias. Including messages about such topics or any emotionally-based topics are a recipe for disaster with a brand, as is misinformation and grammar mistakes (Razor Branding Blog, 2015), and making sure that each post is grammatically correct with spelling and punctuation, double checked each time, is important for any brand.

Avoiding common pitfalls will allow a brand to more easily succeed on social media. These mistakes include failure to blog, inconsistently updating content, thoughtlessly sharing posts, not speaking directly to its audience, and by using poor humor or timing (Alonso, 2015). By using general common sense in posting and avoiding political or social hot button issues regardless of opinion, a brand should remain neutral. By doing that, the brand can appeal to a greater number of consumers.

The value of a brand can also be perceived differently, depending on the demographic. For example, the National Parks Service surveyed users and found that millennials and non-millennials had different levels of engagement and different levels of motivation (Miller and Freimund, 2017). Brands must be careful about perceptions, and constantly monitor analytics to see how messages are received by demographics.

Brand Community

Establishing a community can be important to a website or social media channel. Whether it is a group on a channel or a message board on a website, community can influence repeat users and more visitors to your brand’s online presence. The community of Talking 80s is

informal at best; there are no forums or specialized login screens. Instead, the focus is on the community of the social media channels and the website. This is done in traditional ways, like making comments to posts, and responding to and liking comments. This establishment of communication between the brand and the visitor builds that trust and goodwill, and they know their interactions are not in vain. The brand is listening to their voices as they are recognized within the brand community.

Another aspect of brand community is for the user to develop a sense of identity for the brand and content it provides. Since the Talking 80s brand does not offer a true, physical product, the community is being built by using the methods the National Football League uses for their marketing. In the NFL, the games and teams advertise the NFL; the NFL does not advertise the teams (Oriard, 2007). This means that the types of content posted on the brand will have to catch the eye of the user in order to bring the Talking 80s brand to them. By taking this approach, the shared content is building up the brand in the user's eye instead of relying on a fledgling brand name to bring in users. This approach should also increase the organic audience more quickly than advertising the brand without the content curated designed to catch their eye.

Brand Trust

Establishing a brand trust is important. The brand trust generated by Talking 80s is in that as of right now, there is no blatant sales pitch. The content curated is purely for the enjoyment of the audience. The only sales-related pitch is to visit the website to read an article that has been posted. At the website, the page has links to content to purchase on Amazon. This link is in no way pitched as a potential sale.

Including a “Terms of Use” statement is essential to a website, explaining how information is used, what data is collected, and where advertising content originates. Since Talking 80s uses Amazon links, the statement inclusion is a necessity, and further amplifies the transparency of the site to the visitor.

Consistent content can help to establish brand trust early. Users will know what type of content is available, and they know what to expect. Talking 80s has based its social media channel content upon facts; most of the content is reliant upon things that have happened, “on this day in the 1980s,” and are mostly entertainment and pop culture related. The messages conveyed in the social media content pushed out by the brand needs to be, “attention-grabbing or thought-provoking.” Consumers of a brand will keep moving if the content is not relevant to the brand or too complex to understand (Walker, 2017). This reasoning is why content on social media channels is very simple and always related to the brand, never pushing a sale or, aside from a blog post, a product.

Trust in a social media brand also includes building a relationship with the user and doing so in a non-invasive manner, which also shows a respect for the user (Jaska and Werenowska, 2014). It is smart to not inundate users with content. Instead, brands should utilize analytics and see when its audience is online, and schedule posts around these times. Sometimes, in terms of content, less is more.

When posting content, brands should be judicious in its selection. There may be multiple things worthy of posting, but brands should make sure to keep their audience in mind. Brands should post what will be the most popular or most informative content, regardless of personal feelings. By choosing the content based upon their users’ interests and feelings, a brand can

avoid something called “banner blindness,” which is one of the weaknesses of Facebook marketing. “Banner blindness” defined is when users like the page but fail to interact with it or respond to any of the content posted. Agnes Veselszki said, “It is better to obtain and retain fewer active (participating, liking, sharing) followers than many likers who later disappear” (Veselszki, 2018).

The proper ratio for “content to sales” is an 80/20 mixture. Pop singer Katy Perry said that humanizing your brand and authenticity is key to gaining the trust of your audience.

“I think people like following me because they see that there’s an authenticity to it -- it’s always me Tweeting,” says Katy. “I’m sharing about my life; it’s not always me saying ‘buy my record, buy my record!’.” (Agrawal, 2017)

One of the main things a brand can do in order to gain trust is to respond to its audience. This includes responding to negative feedback, as well as positive (Razor Branding Blog, 2015). For example, if a user makes a comment that refutes your knowledge of the subject, check the research and address it immediately. If the research is incorrect, acknowledge the mistake - brands should thank the user and edit the information. Nobody is perfect. Humanizing the brand and accepting responsibility for typos or errors is necessary in order to build the brand up as an expert in the field.

Brand trust also goes hand-in-hand with content in terms of regular features highlighted by the social channels, and potentially, the website. Part of the content strategy is to create themes. These themes could be weekly features at a particular time, or a monthly theme that lasts the duration of the calendar month (Sharp, 2016).

Using Video for a Brand

Incorporating video is essential to the success of a brand. There are many ways to include video with a brand, from tutorials to marketing (Pilon, 2018). Video makes sense. YouTube is the second largest search engine in the world, only behind Google, which happens to own YouTube. By posting video content to YouTube, it increases the brand's visibility. It could also lead to enhanced search engine results within Google. With the ease of use and low cost of video production tools, businesses and brands would be foolish not to invest in video as a method of marketing or advertising their brand.

Users want something of use from a brand, and YouTube is a great place to get these items of information. Whether it is a "how to" or an "unboxing," there is always something to be found or include from a brand. The content is easily shared with other social media channels, and YouTube integrates well with other channels.

Talking 80s has utilized existing YouTube links for much of its supporting content, providing supporting information or facts about the video content that is not available with the video link alone. While most businesses or brands would create their own video content, Talking 80s relies on the links of others. Since the brand discusses and features music, most music videos from the 1980s are readily available on YouTube. By using previously posted videos, it frees the brand from copyright infringements. The downside is that linking to another's content could result in broken links in the future. Talking 80s uses videos posted on the artist's official YouTube channels to avoid this scenario as much as possible.

Twitter and its Impact on a Brand

While Facebook and websites are fine for communication, there are other applications or social media channels that can be readily used to communicate quickly and rapidly, and a community of users that know to use the application for this precise purpose. This application is Twitter. While websites tend to be slower at conveying information, Twitter is instantaneous at conveying information in short, easily digestible bursts that is easily accessible by smartphones (Locander and Ladik, 2017). Talking 80s has begun to build an audience and following on Twitter, also organically, by utilizing hashtags and tagging the accounts of influencers.

A brand has nothing to lose by tagging influencers, and usually, there is everything to gain. By using information about what is trending, creating hashtags relevant to the content, and tagging an influencer, a brand creates an opportunity to increase its audience, and perhaps even gain followers.

Influencers, and on a smaller scale, micro influencers (defined as having 10,000-100,000 followers), are becoming a big business, increasing by over ten times over the course of four years (Trend Hunter, 2018). If a brand can get a like by an influencer or a celebrity, it can have a great impact on engagement.

Talking 80s has utilized this strategy on Twitter. One tweet, talking about a side project with Duran Duran members, used a hashtag of #DuranDuran. The @DuranDuran Twitter account liked the tweet, which showed up on the timelines of many of their 218,000 followers. After the Duran Duran mention, the Talking 80s tweet received 14 retweets, 192 likes, 402 engagements, and just shy of 8,000 impressions. The number of followers also increased by 10. Hashtags work.

Instagram for the Brand

Instagram is another social media channel to utilize. Predominantly images and short video, Instagram has provided the most impact in terms of followers with the least amount of content.

As mentioned about Twitter, hashtags work with Instagram, perhaps even more. Instagram allows 30 hashtags per post, and a brand would be foolish to not utilize all 30 available to them. When a brand posts an image or video on Instagram, the brand can begin to put “#” and then a keyword into the post. Instagram then shows trending hashtags and the number of posts related to the hashtag, so a brand can get a good idea of what to use in their posts. Brands can experiment with different keywords in order to have the maximum reach for the brand.

Talking 80s on Instagram has not been as active in terms of posts as it has been on other social media channels, but the engagement rate has been higher. One Whitney Houston post had an engagement from the official Hall and Oates account. Another post had engagement with The Blues Brothers official account. Almost daily, there are new followers and new likes, regardless of the activity, simply from the smart usage of hashtags on the application.

Talking 80s content on Instagram has revolved around photos taken of personal items, royalty-free images, and original graphics asking a question with the sole purpose of creating engagement. Using these readily available resources is smart for a brand to do, and Instagram can create a whole new audience, especially since Instagram is popular with generations from Generation X to Generation Z.

Advertising for the Brand

The reach of the brand is slowly growing. The bright side is that it has been organic. In advertising terms, this means it has been natural growth with people genuinely interested in the brand despite not being the targets of a marketing campaign. Not one dime has spent on advertising for the brand. However, to continue this brand growth, investing money in paid digital advertising would be a wise investment.

There are several ways of advertising, but three popular avenues for this are Google ads, Facebook ads, and promoted Tweets. The challenge faced with promoting the brand is to create an ad that resonates with the consumer and influence them to click on the ad, and ultimately, to follow through with the desired result.

Google ads are primarily for websites with product. Corporations, small businesses, companies with tangible goods or events to sell are the best candidates for Google branded advertising. These ads are informative for the consumer who is looking for a restaurant, a new car, or even a leotard for their child who is starting dance lessons.

The Talking 80s brand has no tangible goods as of right now, and as mentioned before, it sells nostalgia. Therefore, Google ads would not be the most economical use of a limited budget. This is not to say that the brand should not have a website; it will, and it will be search engine optimized to show in search engine results pages organically. The decision to go this route is based upon the fact that ad costs for Google are determined in a bidding process. In order to get a higher ranking for the ad, you will probably be paying more than a competitor. If you have no tangible goods to sell, it would not make good fiscal sense to pay for an ad that focuses on

simply getting page views, especially when click through rates are decreasing by the year (Idemudia, 2014).

Most of the consumers of the brand are looking for their nostalgia fix on social media. Therefore, digital ads on platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram would be optimal, but especially Facebook.

Facebook gathers an immense amount of information on its users, allowing its advertisers to utilize that data by granularly targeting the audience the advertiser desires. This could be as broad or as detailed as you wish, all the way down to ages, incomes, professions, and locales. Facebook also allows you to determine what kind of reach you want in terms of sheer numbers. Obviously, the higher number of consumers you want to reach, the higher the cost.

Facebook mentions its ads to page administrators often. Often, they offer an incentive to advertise in the form of a credit, usually \$15 to promote a post it deems is performing well. This gives the fledgling page the opportunity to try digital advertising on the Facebook platform for little cost.

The ad or ads to be created will build on the content on the website. As mentioned before, the site will be coded with Google Ad Network and Amazon affiliate links. By promoting the website on the social media channel, it will offer the opportunity to earn money from ad revenue. When Talking 80s was launched, there was no illusion that revenue will be instantaneous or substantial. If the brand gets to a break-even point in the first year, the brand will be considered a success, and the site, content, and brand will continue.

Talking 80s has tried to target millennials and Generation Z as well by posting on Reddit. Posting images from the Talking 80s Instagram to an audience who may be interested in the

decade, but not necessarily lived it, is a strategy that is used simply for brand awareness.

Responding to Reddit comments with personal reactions and memories of the content establishes the brand voice as an expert in the subject.

Talking80s.com

The Talking 80s brand has evolved with the creation of the Talking80s.com website. This step allows the brand to move to the next level, integrating video, audio, and original articles.

Examples of original and ongoing content includes re-reviewing movies from the 80s. Films popular with Generation X as teens hold a special place in the hearts of many members of the generation, and the reviews include viewings of the films with an adult perspective as opposed to the original teen perspective. Other examples of original content include a 13-year-old teen viewing teen films from the 1980s for the first time, with articles about his reactions to the films. This is an ongoing series, as there are many films to choose from in the decade. Themes for the website also feature soundtrack music from films of a particular year, combining the music and movies aspect of the brand, plus news releases about upcoming events.

Legitimizing a brand can be beneficial for content and engagement. This is achieved by making a pitch to make your brand known to event companies, agents, and promoters as an authority and promoter of the subject matter. Talking 80s has done this by emailing parties, landing on the mailing lists for several promoters looking for free publicity for their product or event. This often includes links to digital press kits, which lets a brand use licensed images within the usage of an article. As a result, it gives a brand the opportunity for more content and potentially, higher search engine rankings depending on the subject.

Future ideas for original content on the website are interviews of celebrities of the 1980s. These celebrities could be newsmakers, musicians, actors or film personalities, or pop culture media personalities. Many of the artists of the era are still active, although without the mainstream fervor which they once experienced, and without the media coverage they once enjoyed. There is every reason to believe that interviews with these celebrities will help make the brand a success. The willingness for the brand to give exposure to the celebrities and their projects will help sell the idea to them, making them more willing to participate in this burgeoning media opportunity.

Conclusion

At the end of Talking 80s as a project, there are areas in which the brand succeeded and areas where success was not as evident.

Areas of success have been in the social media realm. Developing a brand in a purely organic way is not recommended if results are desired within a short period of time. However, the engagement has consistently grown over time, including both Facebook and Twitter. Instagram engagement increases with each post, as do the numbers of followers.

The results of the project have shown that the best way to assure the maximum engagement rates through Twitter and Instagram are through hashtags. By using trending topics as a guide, a brand can make continuous gains. The highest engagement rates on Facebook are related to content. Analyzing the data of the followers and looking at what the audience finds interesting is the best way to determine what content to post. This means that a brand may not necessarily be in control of what is popular on the social media channels; what a brand administrator may find interesting may not be what the audience finds interesting.

The project has also shown an interesting trend of social media overtaking websites in terms of popularity and engagement. While the page views may be there, there is very little engagement on the website.

By utilizing social media and search engine optimization techniques to generate traffic to the website organically, traffic to the Talking80s.com website was not as robust as hoped, and as a result, all attempts to monetize the content with affiliate links have been a failure. One interesting fact is that 48% of the traffic to the website was direct, without a referral. Facebook was the only social media channel which generated referral traffic, which was 45%. Roughly 5% of website traffic was via organic search.

When establishing a brand, organic growth is not the recommended way to success for a brand. Brands must have a budget, must have digital advertising, and must have a strategy to make the brand grow quickly and to make it economically sustainable. Offering affiliate links, or even Google AdWords, are options to monetize a site, but should not be the primary way to earn revenue.

The recommended way for a brand to make money is to offer a product. Nostalgia, as a product, is a bust. Nostalgia is an emotion, and the harsh fact is it carries no economic value unless a brand can find a way to produce content or offer products that can capitalize on the emotion and cause the transaction.

Illustrations



Figure 1. Talking 80s logo, first draft, 2018



Figure 2. Talking 80s logo, final version, 2018



Figure 3. Talking 80s: Television, 2019



Figure 4. Talking 80s Goes to the Movies, 2019



Figure 5. Talking 80s Goes to the Record Store, 2019

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