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Great Minds On Music: An Interview With DDB Worldwide's Chief Creative Officer Amir Kassaei

[Amir Kassaei](#), Chief Creative Officer for [DDB Worldwide](#), was born in Iran, raised in Austria, and educated in France. He settled in Germany in 1997, gaining experience at agencies such as TBWA, Barci & Partner and Springer & Jacoby. Amir is one of the most lauded creatives in the world, working on an impressive range of the world's major brands, including Allianz, Apple, Adidas, Bosch, Coca-Cola, McDonald's, Nike, Reebok and Volkswagen. Amir and his teams are the recipients of more than 2,000 national and international awards, including 40 Cannes Lions in the past five years. Most recently, Amir was tapped by DDB to establish DDB's global creative center in Shanghai. Uli Reese, an award-winning audio branding strategist and President of iV2, sat down with Kassaei in Cannes to talk about the importance of music in branding. The interview forms part of a series, due to be published as a book titled "Great Minds on Music, Brands, and Behavior" this summer. The project also serves as Reese's thesis research for an executive MBA at [The Berlin School of Creative Leadership](#) (a program of which Kassaei is also an alumnus).



Uli Reese and Amir Kassaei

Uli Reese: How important is music in advertising to you?

Amir Kassaei: Music is one of the most important tools to adding emotion to a brand. Music has something no other medium can offer to reach people's hearts if you are using it right.

Reese: Our ability to remember music or songs is more developed than our ability to remember images or moving pictures. Are we giving music enough importance in branding?

Kassaei: It is not about the right sound or the right piece of music. It is about the strategic question "What should my brand sound like?" Which is a completely different thing. For example, my voice differs from yours because my voice is a consequence of my character. What does that mean for a brand? If you look at Apple, it's a holistic approach of, "This is my language, the sound of my company, the way we look at things." All this is reflected in the audio concept of the brand, not only in its sound design or sound track, but in the tone of

its voice as a consequence of the brand character. The way I am talking is different from everybody else and, even if you close your eyes, you will remember me and hear if I'm honest or not. In terms of the company strategy the question is: What does sound do? What do people recognize or comprehend when a brand talks or even when it is silent? It is much bigger than just that. It is about the sound of the door when you enter an Apple store or when you turn on an iPhone. All this is the sound of the brand. The brand personality is related to its sound and voice, and if they do not match with the brand's personality, you have a problem. Volkswagen has a very nice interactive tool: a Blue Motion configurator. You can drive with it from city A to city B with Blue Motion and it tells you how long it takes, what your gas mileage is. It also chooses the music you like, it is setting up the complete soundtrack...

Reese: Love it...

Kassaeci: I think the times are over when it was enough for a brand or company to tell you how great they are. You have to prove you are great, and if you really are, you need to deliver and always come up with innovations. My definition of innovation is: everything that makes people's lives better, easier and more efficient. If you are delivering that, people will love you, and if people love you, they talk about you, and if they talk about you, you are successful, because you have an audience. Everything is history in my opinion. Companies like Apple are doing exactly that, not talking how great they are but proving it everyday. The customer's brand experiences is: Apple makes things easier, better and more efficient. No matter if you experience an Apple store or visit their website.

Reese: People want to get involved. They want a dialogue.

Kassaeci: You cannot fool people. Today they have the possibilities and the infrastructure to show you up. There's this app for the iPhone called Red Laser. You can go to any supermarket in the world, scan the barcodes of products and the app tells you where you can buy the same product. The next version of this app will show product ingredients and an

alternative product of the same category. You cannot advertise against this, no way. Because I can learn from my friends in real time what I can trust, what is good or bad. And then you get to the essence of it – an honest voice. As I said, if my voice was not mine, everybody would instantly get the hoax. Only my voice has its particular character, tone and accent, with all the emotional approach that makes it true.



Reese: Before you even talk to a creative, a composer or music production, what is the process you are going through? How do you communicate music?

Kassaeci: This is where 99 % of all agencies are having a problem. Not only in terms of music, but also in terms of creating things. People come up with creative ideas, they sell them to a client and – only then – they talk to a composer or a music production company to find the missing part. That's the old world. The new world is: There's a challenge to launching a

car like the new Polo and the question is, what do we want to achieve? You have to know the market, the company, you need to have a deep knowledge of the product, its qualities, the worries and needs of the people. You also need to know the technology in terms of digital infrastructure, musical components, whatever you need. Then you need to define the challenge and bring together the right people from all disciplines to solve it. Bring them all together and try to find the best solution. This is a completely different approach than the old approach to advertising, where you write down an advertising idea or a treatment and then, after it has been approved, you start thinking about how to execute it. As we discussed before, if you are not honest in every step, if you are not solution-driven in every step, in search for substantial solutions in which everybody can believe and buy in, it will not work. It's about combined creativity. Nobody knows it all. Finding the most innovative solution is a team play. Besides, most communication challenges for any company, for any brand in the world, will not be solved by mass media anymore. Given this, you have to start to revolutionize the whole working system of advertising agencies. If you are not doing so, you are gone. And we should stop being so arrogant. We are only one part of the process. We need to gather the best minds to do the best job. Of course this includes the composers as well.

Reese: Let's talk about subjectivity. Everybody has a favorite music playlist, which changes all the time. But your top ten songs can release dopamine to your body, you get goose bumps. If a brand uses this, it can be highly manipulative.

Kassaiei: It is already practiced.

Reese: At point of sale it might not make you buy the product, but it will make you feel good about it.

Kassaiei: Exactly, individualization of communication, this is very interesting. Our target groups have become more and more fragmented. So it's not about mass communication anymore, it's about individual people. If you want to reach me,

you should be relevant to me, not to everybody. That's a huge challenge for the advertising industry, which used to believe in awareness. I keep telling my students: We were educated to go to a club every night, stand in the front door, shout at everyone, knowing the person or not, and tell everybody how great and beautiful you were. It worked. It doesn't anymore. Take the vuvuzelas during the World Cup, that's old advertising. A dumb, disturbing sound.

Reese: There are so many intrusions into people's sonic aura. Be it a car alarm, or a barking chihuahua. Why don't car companies offer nicer sounds? Why are there no apps for that to design a different sound?

Kassaiei: At Volkswagen, we were going one step further. We presented a sound design for the brand. We said, "Don't use it only for advertising, but for your product." So starting your car is like starting an Apple computer, with this specific sound of Volkswagen. And by establishing it here, you can use it as a sound logo for your communication – and not the other way around. If you look at most car manufacturers, the sound logo is not related to the product.

Reese: My last question: When you have an idea, how do you know it is a real big one?

Kassaiei: You feel it. You don't know it. Nobody can know it. You feel it instantly. Your body is shaking. You think you can not go asleep before the idea is realized. I have four children. It's like giving birth to a child. It's a complete emotional experience. A great advertising idea is not only great in terms of marketing communication. A great idea has the potential to really change things for the better.

GUEST POST WRITTEN BY

Uli Reese

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