



Stirring the Pot

Which is Better: Vinyl or Electrons?

Those of us who grew up with vinyl record albums remember the days of pulling a fresh “LP” out of the sleeve (remember that great smell?), putting it on the turntable, blowing the dust off the needle, and rocking out. We either listened through a whole album or more likely lifted the phono arm and placed it in the proper groove for the songs we wanted to hear.

Getting a new album required a trip to the record store (during business hours), and we never took our music with us unless we decided to carry a few albums to a friend’s house, with the risk of breakage always on our minds.

We never envisioned a better way, and life was good!

Today of course, our music is always with us and the exact music we want to hear at any time is available with the touch of a button. And we can get more music whenever we want it, in seconds, often at no cost. So life is even better, right?

But hold on.....we’re told that music heard on an iPod is of lower quality compared to the same music recorded on vinyl and played on a good stereo system. It gets really technical but suffice to say a lot of the detail and richness captured in vinyl grooves cannot be captured in electronic files. So in exchange for portability, convenience, and lower cost we’re sacrificing quality.

A few mainstream artists are releasing vinyl records, and the hipster population is fueling a small “return to vinyl” movement. But given a choice, would anyone really go completely back to vinyl and give away our iPods? I think not!

What does this have to do with foodservice?

I had a lot of great conversations with friends at the NRA show about the state of their business. By now, virtually all manufacturers have settled into a broker agency network following a few years of turmoil. There are those who have opted for a single national agency from coast to coast. But most manufacturers, either by design or by accident, have ended up with a “hybrid network,” which includes some markets managed by national agencies, some by regional agencies, and usually a few with local independent agencies.

What is striking is the widespread acceptance, and sometimes enthusiasm, for the national agencies.

Not so long ago many predicted that the national agency model couldn't work in foodservice. Among the many concerns was that they could not possibly provide the same level of street work, key operator calls, and responsiveness as the local independents.

But the acceptance and enthusiasm I heard was about the streamlining, efficiency, and standardization that national agencies offer to manufacturers. If these fans were also feeling a loss of street work and responsiveness, they were apparently willing to accept it in exchange for the other benefits.

Not so long ago, many predicted that there would be a rebound in the number of local independents as a result of disillusionment with the nationals. Many even said that the owners who sold to the nationals would start up new agencies as soon as their contracts expired. It could still happen, but I'm not feeling it.

Changing the Rules

What I AM feeling is that the national agencies have in many cases "changed the rules" about how broker agencies should be evaluated, selected, and managed. Many manufacturers feared the loss of influence (or "control") that would accompany a move from local to national agencies. And unless you're one a handful of huge manufacturers, it's quite possible that you have less influence than you used to.

But it's also possible that the only thing lost is "the illusion of control" as manufacturers come to grips with what they can and cannot reasonably expect from their broker agencies. A perfect example is the decline (or disappearance?) of one-off call reporting as demanded by individual manufacturers a few years back.

All of which is to say that vinyl records and MP3s both provide a way to listen to music, but they are certainly not the same. And in a changing world, the definition of "better" often changes as well.

What do you think? [Tell Dave](#)