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SPITFIRE AUDIO



Table of Contents

Introduction.....	3
Company overview.....	4
Target Audience.....	5
Competition.....	8
Why the rebrand?.....	9
(Re)Brand.....	9

Introduction

We are living in the age of opportunities and possibilities, so much we can choose from but not everything we are willing to spend our money on. In a market overwhelmed with products it is not an easy task to stand out and make yourself recognisable. In the words of Jones, K. (2021, *Forbes*),

“Someone might see your brand for only a moment, but if it sticks out in a positive way, there’s a good chance they won’t forget it, even if this person isn’t ready to use your products or services just yet.”

Therefore, it is important to create a distinct brand that would reflect the purpose of your product, a brand that lures people in, then starting their customer journey, a brand that people want to be a part of and be loyal to.

Spitfire Audio is already a well-respected name in the music technology world, thanks to their pristine product, but

“To truly get the most of your investment, focus on building a brand – not just selling a product. To bring consistent branding throughout your various channels, start with your visual brand. Select colors, a logo and other visual standards that help your audience identify when something belongs to you.” (Thimothy, S. (2020) *Forbes*).

“If it’s not broken, don’t fix it” – people say, but the same way we upgrade our closets when springtime comes or get a haircut to feel fresh again, a revamp can bring back excitement and create a buzz around you. According to Simpson, J. (2017, *Forbes*),

“A brand should reflect the company’s values, mission, market and purpose. Therefore, a rebrand should help a business realign how it envisions the future progress.”

This essay will propose a rebrand that will focus on furthering Spitfire Audio’s mission, building a connection between their product and brand identity while strengthening their position in the music technology market.

Company overview

Spitfire Audio is a music technology company founded in 2007 by two film composers, Paul Thomson and Christian Henson, after being thrown out of an online music forum for making disparaging remarks about another contemporary composer. The two men sat down at a pub and after some drinks and conversation they agreed that all existing virtual instrument libraries were not up to standard and the solution is to have great musicians play in good studios and record them with excellent microphones, note by note, to achieve a high-quality sound.

An idea like this is a big investment. The first collection of sounds was recorded in Air Studios by a full orchestra over a few days, which cost around £250000 pounds. It paid off; Spitfire Audio attracted the attention of other composers, most notably Hans Zimmer, and the company took off. Now, according to Sound on Sound magazine,

“Spitfire Audio products are a staple of film, TV, game and trailer scoring around the world” and have released over 100 sample libraries.

Spitfire Audio’s **mission** is to inspire composers by giving them sophisticated tools to do so,

“Spitfire is to music what Cern is to matter: the point is to break sound down into its ultimate, irreducible particles. And then collide them.” (NewsGroove, 2019)

Spitfire Audio’s focus is on excellence of their products, musicianship and creativity, passion for film music and education. Not only does this company provide exquisite instrument libraries, they also feature a Composer Magazine, an Academy which offers tutorials, tips and masterclasses, a Forum and a record label called SA Records (the latter is a separate entity and will not be affected by my rebranding proposal). Every year Spitfire Audio donate 1% of annual turnover to community projects that nurture musical talent and over £12million has been paid in royalties to collaborators. All these things considered, there is a strong sense of community within the brand.

“Community” is a buzzword at Spitfire. They depend on a huge network of collaborators, and they are always eager to give back.” (NewsGroove, 2019)

Target Audience

It is important to define who your audience and core customers are before everything else. Because of the nature of the company, it is safe to say that the target audience for Spitfire Audio are composers.

“Two of the biggest markets for music are television and video games (which are bigger than movies). According to CEO Will Evans, 90 per cent of their compositions will, on closer inspection, turn out to use samples from Spitfire.” (NewsGroove, 2019)

There are different types of composers with different types of income, ranging from nothing to thousands, if not millions for some. Composers tend to charge per project or per minute and some of those projects might take a few days, some take months.

“That can be anywhere from \$2,000 to \$10,000 for an ultra-low budget indie film, up to \$300,000 for a mid-level feature, reports DIY Film Composer. The Hollywood blockbuster might come in closer to \$2 million, but there are only so many Hans Zimmers and John Williams making this kind of money!” (Chron Contributor, (2020) Chron)

Christian Henson himself charges £10,000 - £30,000 for a TV feature film but that is not what another composer would charge for a student film. There are also other sources of income like royalties or other types of work. Why does this matter? This helps us understand what our audience is capable of affording and whom we should be aiming our products at. Also, knowing that composers don't rely on stable income, they are pickier when choosing a product and are less likely to be impulse buyers.

I have separated the target market into:

1. Composers for blockbusters, big music artists like U2 and Radiohead

These people tend to be in the older age group. There might not be too many of them, but these customers are more likely to get the expensive products and the packages. These are the people that can afford hiring a real orchestra and might use Spitfire products to write the scores before recording them. This clientele can be called the “upper-class”, a reason why Spitfire Audio is seen as a noble brand.

2. Composers for television, Netflix, Amazon Prime and alike

These people are less likely to hire an actual orchestra and rely on high quality sample libraries. Age can vary depending on person’s career success.

3. Composers for independent movies and aspiring composers

This is a very important thriving market; they might not be high earners yet, but they are the ones that will be upgrading as their careers grow.

“... as the whole point of an ad for a virtual instrument is to make a member of the target audience believe that the product will facilitate their transformation into the ideal subject of the successful composer.” (J., Tan, S.L., Rodman, R. (2021) The Oxford Handbook of Music and Advertising)

4. Music producers

Orchestral sounds are not exactly a novelty in popular music (‘Toxic’ by Britney Spears is the perfect example),

“they can lend a sense of authority, grandeur and timelessness.” (Bigwood, R. (2022) Sound on Sound,).

These customers might not be coming back too frequently but also cannot be ignored.

5. Students and bedroom producers

Another important market, these people are least likely to be high spenders, but they are worth building a connection with because they might return for upgrades if satisfied with the free products.

I have talked to a few musicians, producers, and composers and asked them about their opinions on Spitfire Audio.

1. One of them was Zane V., an independent film composer based in London, UK, aged 29. She found out about Spitfire Audio because of Ólafur Arnalds who happened to have a collaboration with the company. She owns a few sets of strings and keys from Spitfire and would likely purchase again if there was another collaboration with someone she is fond of. In her opinion, what defines the Spitfire brand is the distinctive sound of their instruments.
2. Second was Richard V., 36-year-old electronic music producer who uses cinematic elements in his tracks, based in Florida, USA. He knows of Spitfire Audio, just has not landed there for some reason. In his words:

“There are just a million companies making great products. There are many I don’t have. The next one I’ve been wanting to get, for example, is Opus by which is EastWest. /.../ Me not having something from a company doesn’t mean I think anything less of them. Just haven’t had the time and money for it. There are so many, and many are very expensive. /.../ Branding always works on some level even subconsciously, but I don’t pay much attention to that. I want to hear how it sounds and how practical it is user-wise.”
3. The other producer was Danielius Z., 35, based in London, UK. His specialty is electronic music. Not someone that Spitfire Audio would be targeting specifically but he too has heard of the brand and has never used it, said it was too expensive for him. I’ve asked if he has ever used LABS which are free and his answer was that he prefers creating his own sounds than using samples.

This little survey shows someone who is likely to come back as a customer, someone who is targeted but has not yet built enough interest and someone who is out of Spitfire Audio’s target range.

Competition

Reading through the VI-Control forum, which is a discussion platform for (mostly) composers, Spitfire Audio are very well perceived, though East West Composer Cloud might be considered as the main competition. East West offer their full collection worth over \$15000 on a subscription basis, \$49.99 a month or \$599.99 a year (without the current 60% discount), with the possibility of buying the instruments separately.

There are various opinions about the subscription model, some people prefer it because they can opt in whenever they need the library and don't have to buy the products, but then there are people who dislike the subscription model because they feel like they end up paying more eventually and would rather own the products.

Spitfire Audio and East West Composer Cloud both offer high quality virtual instruments and it is common for composers to use both, but what East West do better for sure is their online presence. East West have been around for over 30 years and are considered as leaders in the virtual instrument software world, therefore their website looks grand and smells of Hollywood, one could instantly tell that this is aimed at film composers and is offering quality. It is something that I was expecting from Spitfire Audio but they come across as very modest in comparison.

Why the rebrand?

As mentioned in the introduction, it is natural to change once in a while in order to evolve and compared to other music technology companies like East West Sounds, Native Instruments, Soundtoys, Arturia, Universal Audio, Spitfire Audio look outdated and there is a lot of room to improve. Just by having a glimpse at the website, it looks like a blank canvas ready to be customised and deliver the message that they provide sounds for **FILM** composers, rather than just dropping a sentence saying exactly that. The company has grown a lot since 2007 and is considered to be one of the top names when it comes to orchestral libraries. Their products are timeless and high class but the appearance does not scream “Big Player” unfortunately.

(Re)Branding

The current branding seems like a *“let our product do the talking”* approach, by that I mean that what Spitfire Audio offer is much more interesting than what they look first hand. The company is direct to consumer, the website being the main platform in which the product is sold. This being said, the website is, in a way, the face of Spitfire Audio. What is consistent with the current branding is that they make it clear that Spitfire Audio makes inspiring sounds and scoring tools for film in collaboration with the best in the business. They tend to use words like *‘heroic’*, *‘epic’*, *‘majestic’*, *‘beautiful’*, *‘authentic’* in their descriptions and social media posts and the use of emojis in the latter makes them look approachable and down to earth.

Currently (as of 25th March, 2022) Spitfire Audio are holding an APEX22 campaign that offers 50% off on selected products and that is the first thing we see when entering the website. The imagery used is of snowy landscapes, all in blue tones, which is slightly bizarre when people are celebrating the long awaited spring and enjoying the 18°C weather. It looks like a delayed winter campaign. They did come up with a fun concept of *“Where in the World is Christian Henson?!”*, clues of the location are given in a few short videos on socials and when clicking on the link provided to enter, it asks to log in and pick the location in the map with the chance to win the Symphony Complete. The concept is fun and engaging but feels a bit out of place. It does give that sense of approachability and that

people behind Spitfire Audio would be fun to hang out with. On the other hand, what does Christian Henson being on holiday in Iceland have to do with music composition and Spitfire Audio? The reveal was also very anti-climax, a 90 second video of him standing in the location and revealing the coordinates. At first I thought that APEX 2022 was their new product and not just a promo code and a competition by the way it was presented. As the reveal we could have had a short cinematic video of people looking for Henson, checking their compasses and then finally finding him stuck in a tree surrounded by wolves or crushed by snowfall. When rescued, the saviour asks: “*What are you doing here, Christian, at the Kerid Crater, it’s freezing here let’s go back to London, the sun is out, the beer garden is calling!*”. And then Henson replies: “*Well you know me, Paul, the miles I would go to find... INSPIRATION...*”. And then there’s another competition to create a score for this dramatic skit.

The company is also present on social media platforms like *Instagram* (118K followers, with decent audience engagement, videos tend to have 3K-15K views and the posts get liked by 300-1500 accounts), *Facebook* (61,682 followers, view count ranging from 1K to 3K, 20-200 likes per post, *Composer Magazine* posts have much more views (up to 100k) and likes up to 875, *Twitter* (28,6K followers but the crowd engagement is significantly lower with 5-40 (some peak at ~200) likes). The *YouTube* channel has 187k followers, with the most viewed video being ‘*Behind the Curtain - Hans Zimmer Percussion*’ with 1.1million views released 8 years ago. They post regularly on each platform and it’s natural that some get more reach than the others, the content is well presented and informative.

The current website is a simple blue/white template with basic pictures (29th March update: now the headers are brown, in relation to their Piano Day promo). Spitfire Audio’s aim is to inspire composers but therefore their imagery is very uninspired. If we go to the *Product* section and click *Strings*, *Keys*, *Orchestra* or *Percussion*, all of them will have an unexciting picture of what the title describes. It looks like a very outdated way of representing a product and more could be done hiring a creative photographer. The product is aimed at classical music composers but it is insulting to think that *classical* has to be generic. Being able to compose for a whole orchestra is, indeed, very *cool*, and it is possible to illustrate that. As a proof I would actually take one of Spitfire Audio’s products called ‘*Spitfire Symphonic Motions*’ which has modern and classy imagery of a dripping violin which looks like it’s been covered in turquoise coloured milk – it’s interesting and reflects

the name of the product. It is not even necessary to have a picture of a violin in your strings section - Spitfire Audio customers are aware of how it looks like.

For an expensive brand like Spitfire, their free LABS section looks cheap. When we open the section, we are greeted by a gigantic yellow price label saying FREE and LABS in smaller letters written vertically. The emphasis is being put on the fact that it's free and the yellow label looks like something you would see in a grocery shop's discount section. The emphasis should be on LABS and not the fact that it's free, or at least represented in that way. These are still high quality products that passed Spitfire's quality check and the representation should not look any less than the one of a paid product. The branding should be consistent and display pride and quality, no matter how much the product costs. The big yellow price tag looks a bit condescending and should be addressed.

On the other hand, the artwork used to illustrate the LABS products is visually appealing in a way that it's playful and youthful, but it just doesn't really make much sense. I mentioned before that it is not necessary to be obvious, but in this case, the illustrations have very little in common with the products, apart from *Glass Piano* which has a picture of Philip Glass, the composer. There's pictures of cards, animals, children, dinosaurs, postcards, and other clutter, not very music related, but sweet - could also be aimed at children, not composers. Spitfire Audio claim that

"Our free LABS range of virtual instruments has now been downloaded by more than 1m composers, musicians and producers worldwide, and used on everything from bedroom demos through to Beyoncé records."

It would be nice to know which Beyoncé record features LABS instruments but even without that, LABS is a part of Spitfire Audio and should look expensive even if it's free.

The Composer Magazine is one section that actually looks sleek and modern, though it lacks a search option and tags that would help navigating. There are a lot of articles on it, and not having a search option makes it feel more like going through pages of a magazine, but not everyone has the time to go through all of it, sometimes people look for specific things.

The *Academy*, *Forum*, *About Section* and a link to *SA Recordings* I would have under one drop menu called *Community*. Community is an important value to Spitfire Audio, and it should show on the website. Also, it unclutters the menu.

The content of the Academy is great but the presentation not so, it looks outdated and dry.

Not only the design but also navigation needs work. In 2018, the company released a print publication called *THE SPITFIRE AUDIO ANNUAL — ISSUE 1*, 246 pages of stories, pictures, conversations and interviews. The physical journal is a great idea when all your products are digital and, being a limited edition, it could be a valuable collector's item. There are no direct links to it on the website, same way as there is an *Editorial* section but no easy access to it. Both I found by searching "Spitfire Journal" and "Creative Cribs" on Google. The page for *Creative Cribs*, which is a part of the Academy led me to other features like *Journal Archives*, *Up Close*, *Behind the Curtains*, *The Vault* (this one is empty though), and it just confused me, where is it all coming from? If it's there, why is it not accessible? Is it meant to be seen by people? The website feels like going down the rabbit hole and needs spring cleaning and organization. Also, with something called *Annual – Issue I*, you would expect one every year. The idea seems like it's been discontinued, though the traces are still there. In the rebranding process I would bring back this journal, it's quite unique and classy. And people do like physical things, especially when they are limited edition.

Currently the website looks like it was made using a basic template and the colours change depending on the promotion, the photographs are outdated and not as high quality as the Spitfire Audio product is. The product descriptions and the *About* section are well written and informative but the layout is either clumsy or just very basic *picture-text*, which is enough to say that a new professional template is needed.

The name Spitfire Audio

"...was the result of Henson living next door to the Imperial War Museum, which boasted a Spitfire soaring through the foyer." (NewsGroove, 2019)

Since the brand doesn't really have its own colours, I would assign navy blue and dark red, similar colours to the *Type B* 'night roundels' that can be seen on the aircraft's wings. Together with black and white they look bold and sophisticated, also resemble a movie theatre auditorium which often have red/blue chairs and carpets.

Spitfire Audio has two variations of the logo, one being the company's name in *Humanist / Gill Sans* font (there are different variations that all look the same), the other one

is a black circle with the name inside going round. Both are very bold and simple and throughout the years became recognisable within the community. Simplicity go hand in hand with elegance, so I would not change the logo drastically but thought it would be creative to connect the Spitfire aircraft to music and film. One of most recognisable icons for film is the camera or projector with two reels. The new logo would be those two reels in the style of the aircraft roundels, but in darker colours (not trying to copy the Royal Air Force, only dragging inspiration from it). One reel would have “*Audio*” and other written “*Spitfire*” in slightly different positions to create the image of movement. The text could move around when hovering the cursor on it, beginning of videos. Other variation is having the two reels behind the name. Wouldn’t do much to the font itself but it looks more modern when erased a small part of the letters *P*, *T*, *F*, *R*, *E* and *D*. More *hip* but not going too far away from the original.

To escalate the ***film*** aspect of the brand, I would implement a movie poster aesthetic in a few ways:

1. Having actual posters of the movies that Spitfire Audio products were used on. As my interviewee Zane V. mentioned, the instruments have a distinguishable sound and experienced composers can recognise them in scores, not everyone though, so it would be interesting to see them. An example would be Hans Zimmer’s Spitfire section, but there are definitely other movies that could be on display.
2. Making retro movie looking posters for the most popular products and using them in the background. I’ve made an example which can be seen in the portfolio using actual posters. Even though the products have been on sale for a while, I think it could be a creative way of reintroducing them to the audience.
3. Having a new series of products, it could be compilations of already existing different ones or brand new smaller collections. The artwork would be movie posters and they would suggest a genre, different one every month. An eye capturing picture, with a tagline, that would invite composers to interpret the theme song. The product would be sold with a special discount that month and people who buy it would automatically enter the competition. Composers would be expected to use instruments specifically from that compilation and their work would be displayed on the product page - that way giving both the product and the composer exposure. The selected entries would get a gift card or a promo code for future purchases. After all, Spitfire Audio’s

mission is to inspire and I believe this campaign could be a unique way of not only inspiring, but also elevating monthly sales.

Another idea, might be a bit risky, try to connect more with film creators, where most successful Spitfire Audio competition entries would be given as a brief, and filmmakers would apply their footage. They might not be the direct target audience but it is called **FILM MUSIC**, and the two are forever entangled. Having this sort of campaign could start new relationships between individual composers and film makers and could be a beginning of future collaborations if successful. Having the name Spitfire Audio being mentioned by filmmakers more frequently could make the brand more recognisable in the film industry, not just composer world. Not everyone owns or wants to own an Apple product but everyone is familiar with brand anyway, just having your name around could attract attention and start people talking.

In conclusion, Spitfire Audio is a pristine music technology brand, just wearing an untidy outfit. If we could use 'boutique' as a verb, that would be exactly what my rebranding strategy would suggest, making the company look more elegant and stylish, bringing it to 2022, where having a great looking and functioning website is a must for an established company. Connecting more with film and its aesthetics and showcasing creativity in campaigns that would inspire the community would further elevate the brand and its mission.

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