

Nikki Hirsch: Product Manager Lava/Atlantic Records

"WHEN I WAS AT BOSTON UNIVERSITY, I TRIED TO BECOME A COLLEGE REP," NIKKI Hirsch recalls. "I wrote letters to every single record label, and they all rejected me. But," she adds, "I saved those letters." Despite her early setbacks, Nikki was not discouraged from pursuing her dream of working in the music industry. As an intern in her college alumni office, she obtained a list of BU grads who worked in the music industry, and upon her graduation, she sent them all letters to try to get her foot in the door at one of their companies. Someone at Atlantic Records helped her land an interview, and she got a job as an assistant! Six years later, she is a product manager at Lava/Atlantic Records, home to Simple Plan, the Click Five, and up-and-comers Antigone Rising. Even though she manages seven artists, Nikki was able to take some time to give us a glimpse of her very busy—but very cool—career.



BY VERONICA DOMINGUEZ

Why did you want to be in the music industry?

I was always interested in music. I took lessons in guitar, piano—even the violin, for like 5 minutes [laughs]. I also had a strong interest in business because my family had their own business. So it seemed logical to combine both, and at a very young age, I was planning my corporate takeover of the world.

What does a product manager do?

The one thing that sets this apart from other industries, is that our products are people. A product manager has an integral role in breaking an artist. Once the final music is in, I draw up a marketing plan and work out a budget. I'm the team leader on everything from radio to publicity to video to retail, until the record is in stores. I'm like the center of the wheel where all the points converge, so I have a 360-degree view of everything related to each project. The product manager also looks for special opportunities for the artists. For example, once the deal with Starbucks and Antigone Rising was negotiated, it fell on me to coordinate performances on Starbucks'

"Ultimate Coffee Break." I also manage the artists' calendars to monitor their interviews and appearances and ensure that we're covering all bases in our marketing plan. It's all about maximizing exposure for the artists.

What do you like best about your job?

When an artist achieves some level of success, there's a tremendous amount of pride and a feeling of accomplishment because you're so invested in that project. To take an artist from complete obscurity and have a real hand in breaking them, that's the best part.

What do you like least?

All of the little details that can overwhelm you. You have to look at your project and see it all at once, and then also look at every detail through a magnifying glass. To do both is quite a feat.

What makes a good product manager?


On the marketing side, it helps to study artists who have succeeded and learn how they made it. On the administrative side, you have to

multi-task, be proactive, and have a good memory. You should also have good people skills and problem-solving skills because sometimes you've got to put out some fires.

What would one of those "fires" be?

Maybe you promised that the band could do something, but they can't. Or the artist doesn't like the CD artwork or is being uncooperative and doesn't want to do things. It's a big strain because you've got to make it come together somehow.

What advice do you have to offer?

Be ambitious and resourceful. You know the cliché: *It's not what you know, it's who you know.* That's true. Who you know will get you here, but what you know will keep you here. Educate yourself on what's current in music and watch the trends. And network! Let people know that you're interested. I believe that good people will help. Remember, don't get discouraged; save your rejection letters, and then you can hang them on your wall when you get a job—like I did. 

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