

Universal Audio's Hearing Test

Universal Audio Inc. reinvents its brand story and creates an immersive product-testing experience that generates 15 percent more leads and engages attendees for an average of 30 minutes. *By Brian Dukerschein*

"Innovate or die" may be a popular axiom in the business world, but cutting-edge products are often met with skepticism. Take The Folger Coffee Company Inc., which in 1975 debuted its Crystals brand of instant coffee. Despite an ambitious ad campaign and "Tastes as rich as it looks" tagline, coffee connoisseurs weren't convinced the convenient, freeze-dried powder could duplicate the flavor of a freshly brewed cup of joe.

So in 1980, the company launched "The Great Folgers Switch," a series of TV commercials in which hidden cameras revealed that diners at top restaurants couldn't tell they'd been served demitasses of reconstituted granules and not gourmet Arabica. The campaign was a success, and soon jars of Folgers Crystals could be found in the pantries of discerning coffee drinkers across America.

Music producers and audio engineers are more concerned with high-quality decibels than decaf, but these audiophiles are no less wary of novelty and often have a romanticized attachment to conventional studio equipment. This was no secret to Universal Audio Inc., a California-based manufacturer of professional recording hardware used to capture the signature sounds of artists ranging from Frank Sinatra to the Beach Boys. In the late 1990s Universal Audio began introducing digital recording tools to supplement its beloved analog products. This eventually led to a line of more than 90 software plugins that faithfully replicate the aural nuances of a Chandler Limited Curve Bender Mastering EQ, a Fender Tweed Deluxe amplifier, and more — and all controlled with a few clicks of a mouse or taps on a trackpad.

TRAFFIC BUILDER

Exhibitor: Universal Audio Inc.

Creative: Universal Audio Inc., Scotts Valley, CA, 831-440-1176, www.uaudio.com

Production: Czarnowski Display Service Inc., Chicago, 800-247-4302, www.czarnowski.com

Show: National Association of Music Merchants Show, 2018

Budget: \$75,000 – \$99,000

Goals:

- ▶ Demonstrate how digital software can replicate the aural qualities of analog recording equipment using A/B testing.
- ▶ Collect 10 percent more leads than at the previous year's show.
- ▶ Increase attendee dwell time to 10 minutes.

Results:

- ▶ On average, attendees correctly identified half of the audio clips.
- ▶ Gathered 15 percent more sales leads than at NAMM 2017.
- ▶ Encouraged booth visitors to linger in the exhibit for an average of 30 minutes.

Edison-bulb lighting cast a warm glow and enhanced the anachronistic feel of the space.



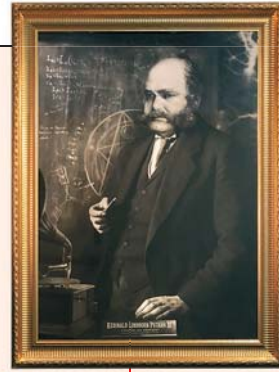
Hardware and wiring for the audio testing were concealed inside cabinets designed to resemble antique wooden barrels.



Reginald's writing desk was accented with a feather quill and a notebook filled with the madcap inventor's musings.

In addition to offering a product-testing experience, the Audio Comparatorium used a richly detailed environment to spin a fictitious tale about Universal Audio Inc.'s origins.

The space was branded with a 10-by-3-foot overhead sign printed with a distressed, Western-style typeface.



A portrait of the company's fictional founder, Reginald Longhorn Putnam III, combined elements of 19th-century photographs with the likeness of Universal Audio's current CEO.



Images from the in-booth photo op were streamed to a pair of aisle-facing monitors.



The walls and floor of the Audio Comparatorium were clad in vinyl printed to mimic weathered wood.

A vintage-style player piano in the back of the exhibit plunked out jaunty tunes apropos of a Western saloon.



The first museum-like display attendees encountered showcased blueprints for one of Reginald's Steampunk-themed auditory inventions.

Marketed as Universal Audio Digital (UAD), the software earned accolades from scores of industry pros, but a number of skeptics remained. To help sway a few opinions, in 2017 the company posted a video on its website and YouTube channel in which Grammy-winning music producer and engineer Jacquire King put Universal Audio's Apollo recording interface and UAD plugins to the test against traditional analog equipment. Hundreds of thousands of viewers watched King's no-nonsense assessment — and approval — of the plugins' performance, and Dan Fulop, Universal Audio's e-commerce manager, took note as well. "This video brought the hardware versus software debate that has always surrounded UAD to the next level," Fulop says. "I think it was refreshing for people to see us produce an honest comparison and let the chips fall where they may."

Gathering Steam

While the King video was racking up views on YouTube, Fulop and Erik Hanson, Universal Audio's director of marketing, were wracking their brains to come up with a new traffic builder for the company's exhibit at the 2018 National Association of Music Merchants Show. For the past three years, Universal Audio's NAMM stand featured a 10-by-10-foot vignette of a '60s-themed recording studio that functioned as a highly interactive photo op. The activation was popular with attendees (and won Fulop an EXHIBITOR All-Star Award), but the marketers felt it was time for a new concept. "The idea of a hardware/software shoot-out was something we'd been considering for years but never got around to," Fulop says. "After the response we received to Jacquire's video, we thought this could be the perfect time to extend that discussion to the NAMM show floor by seeing if

attendees could hear the difference between audio clips processed with traditional hardware and our plugins."

As with the '60s vignette, the marketing team wanted to offer booth visitors a transportive experience. Their initial plan was a literal take on a carnival-style shooting gallery set in an Old West saloon — an engaging environment, but one that came with some narrative snags. "If the setting was the Old West, how could there be electricity, audio gear, and computers?" Fulop says. "We realized we needed a back story to help set the tone, so we started playing around with rewriting our company's origin story."

15%
The powerful lure of the Audio Comparatorium resulted in a 15-percent bump in leads compared to NAMM 2017.

What the team concocted was an alternate timeline in which Universal Audio wasn't founded by industry legend Bill Putnam in 1958, but by his fictional ancestor, a brilliant inventor named Reginald Longhorn Putnam III, a full century earlier. And rather than a full-on saloon, the backdrop would be Reginald's laboratory, an anachronistic, Steampunk-inspired setting where digital audio equipment, headphones, and touchscreens would feel like apt accoutrements to 19th-century Western decor — with a few barroom and museum elements thrown in for good measure. "Once we started to develop who Reginald

was, we fell in love with him being a cross between Nikola Tesla and Indiana Jones," Fulop says. "Things got insane by the end, but we knew the payoff would be huge if this was executed well."

With the theme set, Universal Audio's exhibit house, Czarnowski Display Service Inc., got to work fabricating Reginald's off-the-wall workshop. As the parameters of the A/B audio-testing experience were finalized and a pastiche of props started arriving from online retailers, one important detail remained: an attention-grabbing name for the traffic builder. "We needed something that sounded 'old-timey,' pseudoscientific, and fantastical at the same time," Fulop says. During a lightning round brainstorming session, someone shouted, "the Audio Comparatorium." The search was over, and it was finally time to acquaint NAMM attendees with Reginald Longhorn Putnam III.

Musical Journey

Since Universal Audio's new activation was situated at one end of its 20-by-70-foot island exhibit, the remainder of which was mostly unchanged from NAMM 2017, showgoers approaching the booth from the opposite side encountered a familiar arrangement of product displays and demo stations. To help inform these booth visitors about the engagement at the other end of the exhibit, Universal Audio teamed up with Seattle-based All is Well Studios to produce a teaser video introducing Reginald and his equally fictitious Algorithmic Society. Featuring atmospheric imagery and a voiceover performed in a Western twang, the 60-second clip played on monitors in the front of the booth and urged attendees to "come around back" and see if they could tell the difference between analog hardware and Reginald's "newfangled" software.

PHOTOS: CZARNOWSKI DISPLAY SERVICE INC.

Their interest now galvanized, visitors in the front of the exhibit made their way to the Audio Comparatorium at the opposite end, where they joined attendees who ventured from the other side of the show floor. Enclosed on three sides by 8- to 12-foot-tall walls clad in vinyl printed to mimic weathered wood paneling, the Audio Comparatorium was a discrete 20-by-15-foot space in which Universal Audio transported attendees to its make-believe world.

After a staffer scanned their badges at the entrance, attendees stepped past a sign reading “Welcome to the Audio Comparatorium of Reginald Longhorn Putnam III, established 1858” and joined a line formed by winding brass and hemp-rope stanchions. The setup was similar to how amusement parks such as Walt Disney World corral visitors waiting for a popular attraction — but that wasn’t the only cue Universal Audio picked up from these masters of experiential marketing, who wisely make the time spent in line as immersive as possible. “We wanted attendees to feel the experience the entire time they were in the exhibit,” Fulop says. “Anticipating that they could be waiting in line quite a while to even get to the audio challenge, we made sure to fill the walls and surroundings with things that would entertain visitors while furthering the narrative.”

One of the first displays attendees came upon was Reginald’s “original” drafting table. Procured from Cost Plus World Market, the wooden apparatus featured a blueprint of the madcap inventor’s “Audio Phonic Locomotorium” rendered in intricate detail by Martin Lindhe, Universal Audio’s creative director. In true Steampunk style, the otherworldly train combined antique elements with modern-day electronics, in this case the company’s



Brass stanchions topped with signage calling out various displays kept attendees engaged as they waited in line.

The Audio Comparatorium presented attendees with a challenge: to see if they could distinguish between musical recordings processed with analog hardware and Universal Audio Inc.’s software plugins.



Before beginning the audio-testing experience, participants were given 3-by-5-inch scorecards on which to mark their guesses.

The listening stations were equipped with pairs of headphones so that friends could enjoy the experience together.



After donning headphones at each of the four stations, participants pushed a quartet of buttons to toggle between a series of short audio clips.



Button 1: The first audio sample was of a “dry” track recorded without any processing.



Buttons 2 & 3: Buttons two and three cued the same audio clip enhanced by analog hardware and a software plugin, respectively.



Button 4: Attendees had to guess whether the fourth clip was enhanced by hardware or software.

After completing the listening challenge, attendees moved on to a giveaway-distribution area and a photo-op activity.

A staffer reviewed each participant's scorecard and kept a running tally of the number of correct answers on a chalkboard.



Depending on how accurately they identified the four "mystery signals," participants walked away with either Universal Audio T-shirts or branded shot glasses.



Attendees posed for photos with costumed members of the Algorithmic Society before exiting the exhibit through a set of saloon doors.



sound-mixing equipment. An antique gold frame hanging above the table housed Reginald's portrait, also done by Lindhe. A clever amalgamation of various 19th-century photographs and images of real-life Universal Audio founder Bill Putnam's son (and the company's current CEO) Bill Putnam Jr., the stately black-and-white depiction of the besuited, mutton-chopped character gave a literal face to the Comparatorium's fictional figure.

Being in the business of sound, Universal Audio was mindful of including that element in the exhibit as well. Four speakers carefully hidden in the corners of the Comparatorium played a looping track of sound effects apropos to a Steampunk-themed laboratory, e.g., rumbling machinery, crackling electricity, bubbling beakers, and, yes, the shrill whistle of steam escaping from a valve. Meanwhile, a player piano positioned along one wall plunked out the jaunty melodies one would expect to hear in a quintessential Western saloon. "As you walked through the activation, the sounds would come in and out from all directions," Fulop says. "It added a lot of depth to the experience."

Further up the line, attendees arrived at Reginald's writing desk, also sourced from World Market, and another sign reading "Reginald sat at this very desk while designing the first wooden 'audio-interface,' a dream he would chase for the remainder of his days." A smattering of objects, including a black feather quill resting in an inkpot, a bound notebook, and a pair of branded whiskey tumblers, completed the scene, and a nearby staffer stood at the ready to elaborate on the coming challenge: Did attendees have sufficient auditory acuity to hear the difference between musical recordings processed with analog hardware and the company's UAD plugins?

Comparing Notes

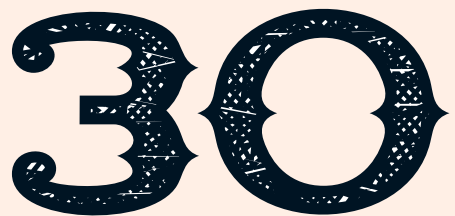
Before attendees moved to the first of four listening stations, the supervising staffer gave them branded golf pencils and 3-by-5-inch scorecards on which they could mark their guesses and fill in their contact information. Each station comprised a 24-inch monitor framed by reclaimed barn board slats, a wall-mounted wooden box with four red buttons that allowed users to toggle among the audio clips, and a pair of Blue Lola hi-fi headphones so that friends could enjoy the “shoot-out” together. Cabinets resembling whiskey barrels concealed the computers and wiring needed for the demos while also functioning as display stands for the analog hardware.

The first station was dedicated to Empirical Labs’ EL8 Distressor and its complementary UAD plugin. After donning their headphones, attendees hit the first red button and heard a short drum solo that was recorded “dry,” i.e., without any processing applied to the track. Buttons two and three cued the same audio clip enhanced by the physical EL8 and UAD’s plugin, respectively. As each track played, the monitor displayed animations of the hardware and software in action. Finally, attendees pushed the fourth button to hear the last processed recording, but now it was up to their finely tuned ears to determine if they were listening to aural effects created by wires and circuits or lines of computer code. Participants then checked a box on their scorecards indicating whether they thought the “mystery signal” was the work of hardware or software.

After completing the next three stations, which featured additional audio clips, hardware, and plugins to test their ears, attendees approached a bar at the back of the space. Here a staffer dressed in period attire reviewed

their scorecards and marked how many of their guesses were correct on a small chalkboard that was kept on display throughout the show. “We didn’t tell attendees which ones they got right or wrong because so many opted to go through the experience multiple times,” Fulop says. Participants who correctly identified one to three “mystery signals” were awarded branded shot glasses, and attendees who got all four had their pick of black or white Universal Audio T-shirts and were entered in a drawing for an Apollo Twin recording interface.

With their prizes in hand, booth visitors made their way to the final



Universal Audio Inc.’s product-testing activation prompted attendees to spend an average of 30 minutes in the exhibit.

engagement: a photo op with costumed members of Reginald’s Universal Audio Algorithmic Society. The sepia-toned snapshots were immediately printed in the booth and presented to attendees in branded badge holders with attached lanyards. (Universal Audio also posted the pics on social media and displayed them on a pair of aisle-facing monitors at the entrance to the Comparatorium — another nod to a common amusement-park practice.) Their experience complete, attendees sidled out a set of saloon doors and slipped on their lanyards, spreading word of the Comparatorium across the trade show floor.

Sounds Like a Winner

Unlike Folgers, Universal Audio didn’t need hidden cameras to reveal its target market couldn’t tell the difference between its product and the real McCoy. The proof, as they say, was in the pudding. “On average, participants were able to get two of the four comparisons correct,” Fulop says. “The results were an absolute bell curve, which is tantamount to attendees having to guess rather than being able to actually identify if they were hearing music processed by hardware or software. Most people were shocked at how few they were able to get right, which is a huge testament to the quality of UAD.”

While the results of its audio challenge were a bell curve, the rest of Universal Audio’s metrics were a straight, upward-sloping line. The company collected 15 percent more leads at NAMM 2018 than at the previous year’s show, handily besting its goal of a 10-percent bump thanks to the powerful draw of Reginald’s Comparatorium. Universal Audio also hoped attendees would spend an average of 10 minutes engaged with the exhibit, but a post-show analysis revealed that the average dwell time was closer to half an hour.

Sizzle Awards judges gave Universal Audio a round of applause for its numbers and a standing ovation for its transportive environment and creative risk-taking. “It was a liability to tell the brand story from a different perspective, but the amount of thought that went into this is astounding,” said one judge. “The approach was closer to something you’d be more likely to find at Disney than inside a trade show exhibit.” And, as Universal Audio learned, you know you’ve succeeded when people can’t tell the difference between an inspired original and its innovative alternative. **E**