

A templative tale from
Mischief Marketing

Mischievous Big Pun

[...]

Big Punisher

Music industry experts agree that it was “street marketing” — a subset of mischief marketing — that contributed most heavily to rap artist Big Punisher’s rise from obscurity to stardom.

Two full years before the release of his album, Big Pun’s producer, Loud Records (partly owned by Bertelsmann AG’s RCA Records), started promoting him by sending out “street teams” to New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles. Yes, I said two full years.

Among other things, these mischievous teams spray-painted the rapper’s name on sidewalks, and traced out the words “Big Pun” in the dirt on parked trucks in Manhattan. This meant that the vehicles instantly (and, um, at a dirt cheap price, too) became traveling billboards for Big Pun as they trundled their way through the city.

And so it happened that without major airplay, without a video on MTV, without coverage in Rolling Stone — in short, without the help of any of the promotional strategies held sacrosanct by the pop and rock marketing establishment — “Capital Punishment” soon became the fifth-best-selling album in the country.

Whereas phenomena such as Spice Girls were born of widespread, traditional public-relations blitzes, the rapper launch is a murkier trajectory — starting first with the low-cost campaigns begun literally on street corners. And teams’ inventive, sometimes illegal, marketing strategies — in evidence since the early ‘90s but now used on a far larger scale — are changing the ground rules of how pop music, not just rap, is promoted today.

— Patrick M. Reilly, “Buddha at School: How ‘Street Teams’ Create Rap Sensations.”
The Wall Street Journal, June 25, 1998, front page.

Mischievous Marie: Okay. Great story. So? So, what are you trying to say?

Inoffensive Ian: Now now now. Tut tut tut. Meow meow meow ... *(Takes out stuffed cat. Sings throughout the following several lines, nearly drowning out*

everyone else.) Meow meow meow meow, meow meow meow meow, meow meow meow meow MEOW meow meow meow ...

Corporate Charlie: I'm saying ... that Big Pun thing ... *Ian, please!* I'm saying that's just a publicity stunt. That isn't something targeted to a particular, leveraged group, or to a particular person. So you can't call that mischief marketing.

Marcus Aurelius: Your mind will be like its habitual thoughts, for the soul ...

Corporate Charlie: *(To the Emperor, violently.)* Oh, shut up! Will you just shut up, you demented wacko? What are you doing in this meeting, anyway? And close that toga! I'm about to lose my lunch.

Marcus Aurelius: *(Closing toga primly.)* Think it no shame to be helped.*

Mischievous Marie: *(Sighing.)* Maybe you're right, Charlie. Maybe that particular story is about a publicity stunt. Except for the teensy little fact that *it wasn't designed to attract the attention of the press at all ...* yeah, sure. Why not. You win. I suppose you could say it wasn't precisely targeted to street kids who distrust marketing. You *could* say it was just a stunt.

Corporate Charlie: *(Triumphant.)* So, that Big Pun story is *not* about mischief marketing, then, is it? Hah? True or false?

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* Aurelius, Marcus. *Meditations*.

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