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Marketing

MAY 2004

\$7.95

NZ\$8.95

DIGITAL DIVA

Ruth McCartney's revolution

Print Post No. 05874572 077231323





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DIGITAL DIVA

Being Paul McCartney's step-sister could cause angst for some people. But not **Ruth McCartney**. The digital diva shares the secrets of her success, both musical and marketing, with Sonia Maginnity.

If you say to somebody, 'McCartney – what does that mean to you?', the first thing they'll say is 'Paul McCartney'. They're never going to say Ruth in a million years." Far from lamenting this, Ruth McCartney adds with a chuckle, "I can change that – one high heel step at a time."

Talking to me from a sushi bar in Honolulu, McCartney's vibrancy bounces down the telephone. And with her own successful music career and a growing multimedia company, those high heels are setting a cracking pace.

So what was it like to grow up surrounded by celebrities? "I had a really normal upbringing. We had to do the dishes and wash the car and walk the dog and mow the lawn and all that stuff that kids do to make pocket money," says McCartney. "Except one of my pocket money details was organising the Beatles Fan Club and then, later on, the Wings Fan Club."

Of course, there were some perks – like having her brother Paul get souvenirs from her hero, David Cassidy and the Partridge Family. But living with a Beatle had its downsides too. "When I went to school kids were jealous. They would beat me up and cut my hair off and steal my lunch and pee in my wellies," she recalls. "People automatically assuming you are a certain way because your brother did something weird for a living, and wasn't a bus driver or a bin man, was a bit of a drag at school. But I'm big and strong and I got over it."

Get over it she did and began her own career in music, inspired by her family and her childhood idols. "As a kid I was a terrible ham. I wanted to be Liza Minnelli and Shirley MacLaine," says McCartney. "Those performers are larger than life and that's what attracted me to their personas. They are the image, the brand, the product, everything, all rolled into one."

Signed to BMG records in Germany, she had great success in Russia and the former Soviet Union. But her early days of fan club management and a sense of the importance of image and brand had planted a seed. McCartney and her husband were living in Nashville, Tennessee, writing country music when "this thing called the internet came along".



An Australian friend living in Nashville told her to look for "a Yahoo" on her computer. "In 1995 nobody knew what a Yahoo was," she says. "So he and I had a suitable amount of Irish coffees over brunch and I went home to look for a Yahoo. And there it was, bingo."

McCartney was hooked. "I [was] fascinated with the fact that I could sit in a bedroom in Nashville, type something and instantaneously someone in North Curl Curl is going to get it," she says. "I mean fax, forget it!"

From there the snowball started rolling. "I went to the Nashville library and rented 22 books – which was the maximum you could check out – on this thing called html code," she says. "My husband and I sat in the house and ordered pizza... a lot. We learned it in three weeks and built our first web page. Then my old friend David Cassidy called me and said, 'Can you make me one of those web home page internet thingies?' And I said, 'Sure'."

"So we registered www.davidcassidy.com and built him his first website," she says. "Then he told America, who told Linda Ronstadt, who told Macy Gray, who told Julio Iglesias." Subsequently, in 1995, McCartney Multimedia Inc was established as a creative solutions provider.

One of McCartney's best known tools is iFanz®, an online data and customer/fan relationship management system used by corporates as well as the entertainment industry. "Our philosophy is that if you hit somebody up for a transaction every single time they hear from you, you're ultimately damaging your brand," she says. She advocates the opt-in club format, providing specific details requested by customers and news and information to amuse and educate. "Then when you do hit up your client for a 'By the way, would you like to finally plonk your credit card down and buy something?', it doesn't come off as the cheesy hard sell," she explains. "Because you've developed the relationship with that customer."

McCartney also places a high value on word of mouth as an effective marketing tool. "How many times has somebody said, 'What a great movie; go and see this film'? And they know you and they know your taste and it was a good pick for you and you've enjoyed yourself," she says. "Or 'Oh my God it was a dog, don't bother'. Nothing kills or recommends products like that faster than word of mouth."

Through the internet, word of mouth is being incentivised, with rewards for people who forward specific recommendations. McCartney sees a power here much greater than the TV commercial. "I know it's aimed at me but nobody's ever told me it's a good experience or a good deal or a great product," she says. "But the minute one or two friends say to you 'Wow, you need to check this out', all of a sudden it becomes so much more powerful."

Complementing the passion McCartney brings to her marketing philosophies is a mischievous sense of humour, evident even in her employees' job titles. "We've got Marketing Mavens, Promotions Princesses [and Code Poets]. I'm the Digital Diva," she laughs. "My husband, he's German and he's the president of the company. So his German business cards say 'der grosse Käse', which is 'the big cheese' in German."

But her real success is driven by her total commitment to her products and her clients. "You've got to show up 20 minutes early and leave half an hour late and just really never switch off," she says. "If your business is your baby and it's your passion, keep doing it and you'll be successful. If it's a chore and a pain in the arse, go and look for something else. Because you know what, the public are not stupid. It takes a working man a long time to earn 40 bucks and it's going to take even longer to peel it out of his

pocket if you're selling something you don't believe in. He's going to smell it. People are like horses, they just know."

So where to from here? While she still thinks the internet is great, McCartney has big plans for mobile and wireless, platforms for streaming video for camera phones, high speed internet modems and cable in your car. "If you rely on somebody to come home every night, switch on their PC and go get the message you sent them, it's the same as switching on a television or opening direct mail. You might as well just sit and wait," she says. "But what are the few things people don't leave their house without? Their car keys, their sunglasses, their wallet and their phone."

With technology offering the ability to find and develop relationships with a smaller, more passionate interest group, McCartney forecasts a change. "You don't need to sell 60 million records anymore," she says. "With the old model in the old days, the record company would pay the Beatles 45 cents a record. If you can keep 15 dollars a record, do the math. You need to sell that many less records."

With the future and her sake in hand, McCartney is excited about her forthcoming speaking engagements in Australia, and especially about the Greek food in Melbourne. "I can't wait for a moussaka and a retsina," she says. Watch out Lonsdale Street, the Digital Diva is on her way. ■

Ruth McCartney entertained guests exclusively at the Melbourne and Sydney Marketing Luncheons, sponsored by Marketing. For information on upcoming luncheons visit <www.marketingluncheons.com.au> or call 1300 363 084 (Melbourne) or 1300 665 450 (Sydney).