



# ROCKSTAR RETAILING

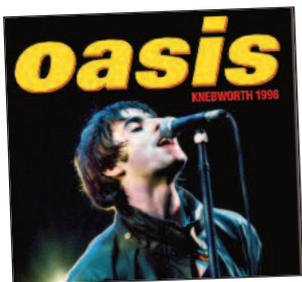


**“This is history...Well, not quite”. Those were the opening words of a talk I gave at the GCA AGM and Conference a few short weeks ago. I had willingly agreed to be one of the keynote speakers months ago, but what would I say? I had the idea that as it was the first time the event took place in the North (Manchester) that my talk would have to be music based. The title ‘Rockstar Retailing’ kept buzzing around my head, along with so many tunes from The Stone Roses, The Smiths and of course, Oasis.**

**While I do not think I am even an ageing rock star, I really enjoyed being part of the gig! Here are a few of the riffs I ‘played’.**

As I walked on stage to Swamp Song by Oasis, I mimicked what the Gallagher brothers had done at Knebworth 25 years ago. I stood there, arms spread out and repeated Noel’s historic words.

My speech was supposed to be about how an independent retailer thinks. It was supposed to shine a light on my buying process and it was supposed to give the 170 publishers and trade suppliers in the room a glimpse into an indie mindset. I wanted the publishers to think about themselves and how they interact with us as customers. I wanted them to realise that not every range they produce will be a greatest hit or appeal to all.



## WE NEED EACH OTHER WE BELIEVE IN ONE ANOTHER - Aquiesce Noel G

Connections, in music and the greeting card industry are vital, they both require a fan base. Oasis went from playing to 100 people in a club in London called The Water Rats to selling out two nights at Knebworth just two years later.

This relatively unknown bunch of chancers from Manchester ended up as the biggest band in the world because they cultivated a following and grew. With Oasis there was a link between the band and the audience. Their songs were about your

Saturday night. About your life. About your hopes and dreams.

Greeting cards, at their best have this same appeal to us as individuals. They are a reflection on us as much as the person who will receive them. They need to fit our tastes and our sense of humour which is what makes our industry so vibrant and diverse.

One thing that cannot be argued is that the publishers and the retailers still need each other. While there is a certain amount of direct selling, most still need the exposure indies, chains and the supermarkets can give them.

The last figure I saw was that 94% of cards were still bought in bricks and mortar stores pre-Covid and even if this figure has slipped quite a bit during last 18 months it is a great indication that the public still like a hands-on approach.

The other great thing about cards is that every store can be very individual due to the combination of ranges and designs they offer. Yes, there will be elements that cross over but usually you will find a range or two you haven’t seen in each store you visit.

My mantra is that cards are still the best way to freshen the look of a display with very little capital cost. I think of it as like downloading a new artist or album on your streaming service, what have you got to lose?



Top: David Robertson with his ‘rock star’ entrance pose on stage at the recent GCA AGM and Conference. Above: Nice Things By Helena is a recent discovery for JP Pozzi, the designs adding newness to the displays. Left: Weird to think that it is now 25 years since Oasis rocked Knebworth.

I highlighted how smaller publishers tend to cut their teeth with indies with the feedback they receive allowing them to refine ranges before being listed with one of the larger players. It is a bit like playing the small venues before you ‘perform’ at Wembley or on one of the other big stages.

## LITTLE BY LITTLE...

Earlier I wrote about followings and fans and as you will all know there are many reasons why people buy cards - design, words, price, but some also look at the style of the shop, the staff and of course the convenience of just where they are.

I highlighted to publishers that they need to turn us into fans of their respective companies. We need to be excited about the ranges they offer and want to get them in store to sell them.



Sometimes it may take time to get that love or it may be an instant attraction or it may be that we get turned onto them because someone else said how great they are.

I discussed samples and how one company wooed us by sending us product samples and really valuing our opinion. They have now gone on to be a main part of what we do.

When I am buying I always lay the actual cards out either in a spare rack in my office or on my desk so that I can see how different ranges will look in store. It is important for me to see how the whole range looks and if all I have are flyers or images on an iPad I may walk away from stocking it - the touch and feel is everything.



Above: A slide David used to show crowd adoration at Oasis' concerts.  
 Below left: A 'greatest hit' tree design from Five Dollar Shake.  
 Below right: David fully accepts that he does not look like a cool rockstar, and wishes he looked more like Jonathan Crosby of Stripey Cats, who was in the crowd at the event.  
 Bottom: A longtime Oasis fan, who David has seen play over 50 times, from small venues to mega stadiums. He took this shot from the wings of celebrated music venue The Barrowland Ballroom in Glasgow.

**THE GREATEST HITS**

In music we of course enjoy the new stuff from bands we love, but many of us will end up listening to the greatest hits.

In the case of the Gallagher brothers, Noel is all about the new the experimental and not looking back, whereas Liam has just sold out two nights at Knebworth for next summer with a mix of his own songs as well as some Oasis classics.

The 'greatest hits' argument works on the greeting card 'stage' too.

Five Dollar Shake is one publisher that customers ask for specifically with its look without doubt recognised and sought out.



I am sure Matt and Beth (Genower, the company co-founders) would agree that the classic 'tree' on their cards should probably have died of Elm disease years ago, but there is a good reason it stays in the range - because it sells and sells and sells!

Piccadilly from Cinnamon Aitch is another for us that has that following. It was one of our best-selling ranges especially in lockdown.

Jonny Javelin too has a cult following for its Velvet range and there are others too. Hallmark's flower barrow card, Henries' award winner Helen Steiner Rice from UKG, Champagne from Second Nature, Loose Leashes from Woodmansterne - all are ranges that

traditional card shops will do well with but have been on the go for a long time.

Noel sums this up best when he spoke about 'a new generation of parka monkeys' that just want him to play Oasis songs. While he tells them to go away - "F\*%k O&F" - I would not be so bold!

So, what do we indies really want? Quite simply, stuff that sells.

But this is a difficult 'setlist' to put together. How do you mix old and new in order to keep everyone happy?

I often see publishers faces drop at PG Live and other shows when I don't buy a range they proudly show me. I hear people say "but this sells brilliantly in..."

The bottom line is while I will buy things I like, I also need to believe that my customers will like it too. One of the greatest skills in retail is not to buy just what you personally like but to also buy what you don't like but know will sell.

**I WANNA BE ADORED**

So as a publisher how do they make us indies adore them? For me the list below covers most of it...



- Great communication - direct via agent/rep
- Quick turnaround
- Lots of new designs, but with the classics always in stock
- Value our custom... even if it is not worth £millions
- Work with us if you want us to try something new
- Margin matters, but less so than with the multiple retailers
- Give us a little breathing space payment-wise and don't flood the market around us.

**THE DIFFICULT NEXT ALBUM**

Some companies and publishers literally pop up, burn bright with one range and then disappear having scratched that itch. However, in many cases the companies and the ranges evolve annually.

As indies we are very aware card sending is changing and it is great to see that so many publishers are very aware of



this too. Whether it is confronting sustainability, producing Father's Day card captions from the dog or simple cards that say you care, they know what they need to do to keep our shops current and selling their designs.

**THE ENCORE**

I ended my 'performance' with an Oasis fest of references, here's an abridged encore... No range will of course LIVE FOREVER. I have never had a MASTERPLAN All I can do is BE HERE NOW pretending to be a ROCK AND ROLL SELLING STAR.

Hopefully my aforementioned points will CAST NO SHADOW and this article will get you all TALKING TONIGHT. Failing that you will just need to ROLL WITH IT.

LITTLE BY LITTLE our card world will return to normal post-Covid and hopefully will be SUPERSONIC this Golden Quarter and none of us will be left CRYING OUR EYES OUT.

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