

What went wrong with MTV?

By Adam McLane All through my adolescence no organization was cooler than MTV. They literally defined what was cool for my generation, as Frontline documented in *The Merchants of Cool*, MTV wasn't just lucky to hit a specific trend at a specific time for 20 plus years. My jaw dropped as I learned that MTV's programming hits were the results of intense and prolonged ethnographic study of their target audience. In other words, MTV wasn't just defining what was cool by themselves, they were hopping on trends and exploiting them for their purposes intentionally. That made them not only cool but powerful in defining culture. During that period MTV was much more than a cable station.

Here's what is interesting. MTV isn't as powerful anymore. Sure, they are fun. Sure, they are profitable. Sure, they sell ad space. Sure, they fill their air time with programming. But they aren't innovating *The Real World*, *Road Rules*, or the after school special known purely as *Carson Daley* anymore. That's right, the company that succeeded for so long as a result of ethnographic studies defining their mission has now lost it's place in cultural significance. Their power is gone.

And why is this? I'm sure there are a number of factors. As an outsider I can't know what internal faux pax lead to their demise from the reign of teen culture creator. Yet I can state the obvious. They had the perfect ethnographically created content on the wrong medium for their demographic. See, the biggest problem MTV faced in the last 5 years is simply that their core audience doesn't watch as much TV. Therefore, their programming isn't influencing the right people anymore. Ads on their network aren't nearly as effective. And songs are not popular because *Carson Daley* said so. And since they aren't influencing the right people they have stopped defining what cool is. Cool is now defined on the internet in 2-3 minute videos. A kid with a \$400 camera and iMovie has as good a shot at producing the next hit as a Viacom.

Suddenly, the industrial revolution had come full circle and cottage industry can now compete with mega industries! (You or I have the same chance of creating the next great thing as the Viacom of the world!) Adolescents don't need to watch TV anymore if they can get their own customized "me channel" online via Facebook, YouTube, and the rest. MTV's flaw wasn't that they stopped doing the hard work, it's that the medium they needed to use couldn't work anymore. Their model has ultimately been their destruction; now MTV is just one of 700 channels on my cable line-up. With students, the Discovery Channel has as much influence as MTV. Anime took off despite MTV's ignoring it. Pop stars were born because of Fox's *American Idol* and not because of MTV's *Made*.

What does this have to do with me? I think there is a profound caution for youth workers in examining at MTV's fall from influence. Much of what we do every day is based on mountains of prolonged study of adolescent faith development and years of perfecting our craft. But I think that we are so convinced that we are merely perfecting what we are doing that we may end up like MTV if we are not careful. We may have a great message, a great band, a great event, and a great ministry that no one attends and is not powerful in the adolescent community it was designed to minister to.

One part of our job is to influence adolescent culture and point students to the timeless truth that a life with Jesus is more fulfilling than a life without Him. While youth workers are now better trained and more tuned-in to studying adolescent culture in their communities than ever before, we run the same risk as MTV. Many of us oversee organizations which are so inflexible that we cannot possibly adapt our methods fast enough. Most of us are shy about even evaluating our methods at all! The challenge for all of us in this is... How do we create a youth ministry paradigm that is nimble enough to adapt its methods to remain effective? Will our leaders support us if we kill a method that had been effective in the past? Will nostalgia lead to the demise of many youth groups?

We can learn from the MTV's of the world and avoid the same fate. Keep the message. Never be married to the methods!