Michael B. Maine
Sony Style and Culture
7/5/2007

# Contents

# Introduction

During the last semester of my undergraduate education, I was offered and accepted a part-time sales position at Sony Style, a retail store that was created to sale only Sony branded products. I was surprised to receive a phone call asking for an interview, as I had turned in my application along with my résumé a few months prior. Although I had no intentions of working in the retail environment, after suffering through many years of retail while attending high school and college, there was something inside me that caused me to apply. I was researching part-time jobs and internships that would allow me to supplement my income while in school, but something drew me to this particular store. Something about the idea of working for none other than *Sony* brought about feelings of excitement and prestige. At the time, I had a great deal of respect for Sony branded electronics because of their superior product based on quality components, ergonomics, and style. As a business major, I was intrigued in their extreme financial cusses, horizontal and vertical growth, product synergy, popularity, and businesses. Sony owns some of the largest movie publishers and record labels in their respective entertainment industries.

Much of my perception of Sony as a company was unwarranted, however. Looking around at my belongings, I actually had very few Sony products. I was limited to a MiniDisc player that I had been using since high school. A MiniDisc player is a portable audio recorder and player that is very similar to a portable cassette players, except that the music is recorded digitally and the storage media is a minidisc cartridge rather than a cassette tape. I had kept it throughout the years because of the versatility of the unit. I was able to record music from any device with an audio output as well as transfer music from a personal computer. Also, the sound quality of the outputted music was much higher than any other portable device that I was familiar with, including the cultural phenomenon, the Apple iPod. Other than

this one device, I had absolutely no other Sony products.  I had a Canon cameral, Nokia cellular phone, Apple notebook laptop, Microsoft gaming console, and a Yamaha stereo system.  I purchased each of these over Sony products at the time because, after doing consumer research, I believed them to either provide the best value of the highest quality product.

When I realized this, it brought about an interesting revelation.  I was very aware that I had high quality electronic equipment.  I never had a problem with my laptop, the pictures that I had developed from my camera were amazing, and I never had a problem with the service, reception, hardware, or software of my cellular phone.  Nonetheless, I felt that Sony made the highest quality everything.  Even with my limited experience with Sony products, and had very little reinforcement either, positive, or negative, I maintained a perception that their products were of the highest quality.  I could not figure out exactly where I developed this positive attitude towards Sony.  I decided that I wanted to discover why I, and others, simply assumed that purchasing a Sony product meant that they were purchasing a superior product.  How has Sony created an image within our culture that represents them as a brand worth paying a premium for?  How have we as consumers contributed to this image?  What happens when a company gets complacent and comfortable with their perception, and market dominance, and places their hope for continued success in one product?  These are some of the questions that I set out to answer as I began my ethnography of Sony Style retail store supplemented with historical, cultural, and business research.

# The Sony Walkman

Much of the success of Sony as an international brand can be attributed to the extreme popularity of the Sony Walkman. There have been very few tangible products that have caused a major shift in American and global culture so rapidly. Usually, I single item does not make such an impact that it revolutionizes the way we do things and an entire culture is created around it. The personal computer, microwave, television, and radio are a few of these products that have revolutionized American culture. Many other items simply slightly alter by adding something new to the culture. In 1979, Sony introduced the "Sound about," the first Sony Walkman. It weighed in at fourteen ounces and was put into production after the general manager of Sony's tape recorder business division Kozo Ohsone presented the Sony honorary chairman Masura Ibuka with a prototype version of it for a trip he was taking to America. Oshone tried to express the amount of potential that the device had to Masura, but Masura was impressed with his personal experience and the sound quality that this, at the time, tiny unit could produce. They skipped the normal process of planning, approval, and other developmental stages, and instead went straight into evolving the unit for a public release. By the year 2000, Sony had already sold 100 million personal stereos (IIE Manufacturing Engineer, 2004). The Sony Walkman was a device that was able to not only become an integral part of a culture, but helped define it. The Walkman was one of the first devices that actually allowed for people to take their music with them. This had many implications. Individuality was more easily expressed in the public domain, as people were able to choose what they heard when they were out and about. Rather than being susceptible to ambient or outdoor noises, people now had the ability to remain in their secluded individuality when running, walking down the street, or walking around a supermarket or store. The meaning of culture is very difficult to describe, as it has been defined to have several different meanings. In this case, I will

assume that culture is a collective set of knowledge and practices that both influences and is influenced

by the people and their surroundings.  The introduction of the Sony Walkman has had several

implications to the global culture.  The meanings that the Walkman has in the culture must be described

by breaking up the various aspects of how something gains meaning.

According to Paul du Gay, "Meaning is constructed – given, produced – through cultural practices:  it is

not simply 'found' in things" (Gay, Hall, Janes, Mackay, & Negus, 1997, p. 14).  Thus, we use knowledge

that we already know in order to map out meanings for new things.  Meaning is constructed as a result

of cultural discourse and practices.  For example, in the United States, the introduction of drive-thru

restaurants was extremely welcome because it added convenience in a fast paced society.  The

discourse allowed for the meaning of McDonald's to be positive because discourse said that there was a

need for fast food and these kinds of institutions provided a service to the people.  In Mexico, and many

other parts of the world, however, these institutions are not as welcome because they are seen as an

expression of American dominance and/or laziness.  They are seen as an attack on an already

established culture of slower paced living, rather than something that neatly integrates with it.

The literal meaning of something is a set of that accurately describe the object in a somewhat utilitarian

fashion.  However, although the words that describe the object are very literal, the connection to that

object depends on the culture.  For example, "portable cassette-player" is literal, but "Walkman" is not.

Over time though, the Sony Walkman became the term used for any portable cassette-player.  The

name "Walkman" became synonymous with "cassette player" much as the term "Kleenex" is often used

as the name of any facial tissue.  It was not longer, "Do you have a portable cassette-player I can

purchase?" but "Do you have one of those Walkmans in stock?"  Moving from the literal meanings to

the more encompassing meanings of something brings us to the concept of semantic networks.

Semantic networks draw information from connotations and cultural discourse about an object in order

to describe its significance in a more cultural context.  In short, semantic networks bring up words or

phrases that we associate with an object.  Such words that can be attributed to the Walkman are:  cool, trendy, high-tech, Japanese, cutting-edge, and convenient.  All of these words bring up their own set of connotations and meanings.  While semantic networks are used to ascribe meanings to objects, they are also used in order to help differentiate between objects that are, in essence, very similar in nature or similar in the functions they serve.  In the case of the Walkman, there were several devices that play and record cassette tapes, but not all were portable, played music at the fidelity, or held other attributes that were in the Walkman semantic network.  It is similar to a tape player in that it plays cassette tapes, but dissimilar in that it does not have built-in speakers.

Cultural practices are just as important in placing an object in culture as the construction of its meaning.  I have discussed how the construction places the object into culture, but what we actually do can force us to reevaluate a products position in culture.  Turntables were once used to play records leisurely primarily in households.  Now they mostly used by disc jockeys who use them as if they are musical instruments for musical entertainment venues.  So, how was the Sony Walkman used?   The Sony Walkman allowed people to occupy multiple social spaces simultaneously.  It created a culture of mobile listening.  People could now occupy a seat on an airplane or train, with several other noises, and, at the same time, be tuned into their favorite artist or group's latest single.  People listened to their Walkmans when traveling, doing chores around the home, mowing the yard, driving, going to be bed, jogging, working out, and at numerous other times.  Before the age of the Walkman, people did not have these luxuries. What they heard was often controlled by their environment.  The main space a person could actively exercise control over what they heard was the home, where they could control the set-top television or the radio.  If a person was on an airplane, they heard the engine noise, people talking around them, possibly their seatmate snoring, or babies crying.  In the workplace, a person was stuck hearing the clicks and buzzes of machinery, the humdrum of people talking, and all kinds of other noises.  If you were walking, you heard wind in the trees, dogs barking, birds chirping.  It was much more

common for a person to strike up a conversation with a stranger in public spaces, almost out of necessity before the Sony Walkman was introduced and became an integral part of our culture. The Walkman was being used in such a high number of various activities, studies were conducted in order to analyze the impact that it had on people in various situations. They were everywhere, and researchers were hard at work documenting the changes that this mobile music player was having on our culture. Walkmans migrated to more places than the sidewalk, airplane, and train. By the late 1990's, Walkmans were becoming a more acceptable device in the workplace realm. According to the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, in a test group of 256 workers, 75 were given permission to wear Walkman headsets. The 75 that were able to wear the headphones reported that they were "less nervous, less fatigued, more enthusiastic, and more relaxed" (University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, News Bureau, 1996). Although the overall validity of the study can be put under scrutiny because of the relatively small size, it never-the-less gives evidence that the Sony Walkman, when used properly in the workplace could actually boost productivity. If somebody saw another person hitting the play button on their Walkman, they didn't think about the person pressing play, but rather that the individual was tuning themselves into another parallel existence. This is culturally significant, because the actions that a person takes with the object projects far beyond the literal into an expression of culture.

Marketing for the Sony Walkman was primarily done through advertising. Advertisements took the place of radio and television spots as well as various forms of print media. The advertising marketed primarily three aspects of the product. The first was the emphasis of the technological prowess of the Sony Walkman. In this case, the technical details were explained or listed in depth. These types of ads were more successful with print media, where the consumer had the opportunity to actually read all of the material at their pace and examine the diagrams that often accompanied it. This method would not have been as successful in a radio ad, where the details would have had to fit a specified time frame, forcing the advertisement or the reader to condense the information into a short period of time, leaving

the listener baffled over what they just heard. The Walkman came to be recognized as a symbol of Japanese sophistication, a symbol of good taste and mobility. The Walkman was a global item, and the advertisements had to be translated into several different languages. However, the words "Sony" and "Walkman" always remained "Sony" and "Walkman." They were never translated. No matter where you were in the world, when you encountered this device, it was always a Sony Walkman. This is culturally significant because it helped to bring about a global cohesiveness and knowledge base surrounding the Walkman.

The next set of advertisements was focused on youth. These ads provided little technical information about the product, but were rather intended to help determine a target audience for the product. It was here that the product was seen as "cool". Advertising is unique in that they are intended to create demand for consumption by introducing something to culture while using culture to introduce it. In order for an advertisement to be successful, several things must take place. The advertising company must understand who they are marketing a product or service. They must also be able to market the product in a manner that reflects some aspect of their target market's by either enhancing that aspect or by filling a void. Many experts have said that advertising can simply be defined as creating a need and filling it. The targeted group of people however must fully comprehend the product and either have a need for it or see it as an enhancement to their lives. The advertisements that portray young people focus more on the cool features of the product and how it can be fun. There is less text and is suitable for print, television, and radio because of the less amount of technical information.

The major group of advertisements for the Sony Walkman compares the features of the Walkman to the features of other esteemed people or products. One of the best examples of this is a print ad in which the ad showcases how music has transformed the value of art from something that cannot be easily duplicated to something that can be infinitely duplicated. The ad has a picture of a cassette tape by soul music singer Marvin Gaye juxtapose a picture of the Walkman. Anchoring the image of cassette tape is

the text, "Everybody should own a copy of this."  Anchoring the image of the Walkman is the text,

"Nobody should own a copy of this."  The sleek black sophistication of the singer is compared to the

sleek black sophistication of the Walkman (Gay, Hall, Janes, Mackay, & Negus, 1997).  The Walkman was

compared to other things as well, such as cars, models, other cars, and to music in general.  Another ad

that I found in my primary book was an ad where Sony compared the Walkman to a Renault 5 GT Turbo,

both of which were regarding as demanding a certain level of respect, representing a certain degree of

class, and a showcase of mobility and style.  One catchy slogan that appeared one of Sony's television

advertisements in 1998 was "It is not only what you play, it is what you play it on," which alludes to the

cultural identity that was to be associated with the Walkman (Chen, 1998).

# The Sony PlayStation

Over the years, Sony has introduced several items that have helped create name for them. The Sony Walkman is arguably the most important product that Sony has ever released, as it was the first item that gained major worldwide notoriety for the company. Sony used the image that was created with the success of the Sony Walkman in order to introduce other products. Another major product launch was the original PlayStation gaming console. The Sony PlayStation actually stemmed from a joint venture and research with Nintendo from the late 1980's. However, the two Japanese companies decided to part ways. Sony nearly abandoned the entire project without the aid of Nintendo, but progressed with the research and designing of a new gaming system that could compete with their cartridge based counterpart. The system launched on December 3, 1994 in Japan, September 9, 1995 in the United States, and September 29, 1995 in Europe.

The PlayStation enjoyed a very successful launch with a library of video games from almost every genre that had been created at that time. The PlayStation made the use of compact disc-based games mainstream. The use of discs had been attempted earlier by Sega with the Sega CD add-on for the Sega Genesis system, but was a commercial failure and was soon removed from the market. Sony was the first company to have a successful while using discs. The discs were a breakthrough for a number of reasons. One of the limitations of cartridges based games was the amount of storage that they were able to contain. Development companies were restricted in the amount of content and creativity they could engineer into a game because of storage limitation. The introduction of the CD-ROM helped eliminate some of these problems as there was considerable more storage space. The CD's also allowed for CD-quality sound and colors to be heard and displayed while minimizing the physical space to store. The major concern with this form of media is its durability, or lack thereof. However,

because of the relatively inexpensive cost of productions, this was not much of a factor.  Because the games were on CD-ROM's, developers were also able to include digital content such as bonus soundtracks, videos, or other content on the actual disc.  Also, the system itself became a media hub as it doubled as a CD player and video CD player.  The product not only competed heavily with Nintendo's own Super Nintendo system, but actually a considerable amount of units more than Nintendo was able to do worldwide.

Again, besides the technical feat that the Sony PlayStation was, an underlying factor that played a major role in its recognizability, success, and popularity was advertising.  While advertising was nothing new to the video game industry, Sony set a new level by introducing campaigns that deviated from what was common at the time.  At this time, advertising for the games showcased a small amount of play footage whereas commercials for the system exemplified the technical prowess of the actual system.  Contrary to other system manufacturers such as Sega and Nintendo, Sony broke the mold by not advertising a product, but by selling a lifestyle. Prior to release of the system, two highly discussed advertisement campaigns.  One of which was "Enos lives" campaign and the other was the "U R Not e".  The exact meaning of these ads was never publically released, but speculation says that the Enos campaign advertisements the "Enos" was supposed to be read backwards and the "e" was to be pronounced phonetically, which would make Sony spelled backwards.  In the "U R Not e" ads, the "e" is believed to mean "ready".  In both sets of advertisements, Sony took a page from the Walkman days and delivered uniformity across all campaigns in order to build a conscious and synergy among the ads to mean Sony PlayStation.  In every ad that was released the stressed "e" was always red in color, while the rest of the text was a standard black.  A similar strategy was used more recently when marketing the third iteration of the PlayStation, the PS3 or PS3 with their "Play B3YOND campaign."

The Sony PlayStation created a space for a new type of gamer.  Until the Sony PlayStation was introduced, the majority of people who played video games on console systems were young children.

This is evident by the types of games that existed on the console games at that time. For example, one of the most highly recognized and played game of all time is Super Mario Brothers, which was created for the original Nintendo NES system. Other games such as Zelda and Mario Kart were also very popular games. All of these games were intended for younger audiences and depicted very little to any violence. For the most part, games that depicted heavy violence and/or sexual content were reserved for higher powered personal computer systems. Such games included Doom and Duke Nukem. The PlayStation blurred the line between the console and the personal computer, both with its hardware and software. The PlayStation used a CD-ROM drive very similar to what would be found on a PC for gaming. Because it could also play video and music CD's, it was used for more than simply gaming, just as a computer. Also, included in its extensive library of game software, there were several titles that included sexual content, an extreme amount of violence, and gore. Such games were Siphon Filter, a spy espionage game, Twisted Metal, a game in which you played an extreme deviant that must use fight in a series of car combat battles in order to obtain your goal. If you were able to beat the game with a character, their dreams were always twisted when they were granted in order to cause pain to that person, much in the same manner as a story would unfold in Tales from the Crypt.

The controversy surrounding the video game industry sharply increased during the age of the PlayStation. There were several reports that alluded to the connection of violent crime and video games. Reports were aired on major news channels as well as in parenting magazines. Other researchers focused their attention on how simply sitting in front of a television can affect the development of children. Idly sitting down for hours a day helped to increase the occurrence of childhood obesity. A study by Adrian MacKenzie studied the effects that the PlayStation has on individuals. He argues that the concept of play has been a human desire since the beginning of time. However, "play" was much more temporary before the introduction of video games that tend to consume a person in a virtual world for hours at a time. When an individual is consumed, other rituals

are subsumed and that person increasingly becomes pulled away from reality.  The video games

reinforce stereotypes and other status quo ideologies and have an impact on people who experience

extended times at "play".  As a person plays more, they are removed from reality and it becomes more

difficult to differentiate the virtual world from the real world, allowing for them to believe that negative

actions either have little or no consequence in the real world, although there is an absence of a reset

button (MacKenzie, 2000).  The Sony PlayStation 2 built on the PlayStation legacy and was known for its

vast library, consisting of well over 8,000 games.  It was also the first video game console to be

backward compatible with its previous generation's system, allowing a person to be able to play any

game that was released for the PSone for thePS2.  The PS2 is the most commercially successful gaming

system in history, selling more systems and faster than any other system in history.  Controversy

increased with games such as Grand Theft Auto, which put you in the role of a gangster who could steal

cars, kill people, and spend time with prostitutes, in realistic locations and situation, contrasting from

the highly unrealistic games like Doom and Duke Nukem.

The PlayStation may have been evolutionary in the games that it brought to consumers

and the level of entertainment that it provided, but out of this came other changes.  Video game

magazines began to increase in popularity.  Electronic Gaming Monthly (EGM) profited heavily from

system comparison issues that highly publicized the advantages and disadvantages that competing

systems had over the other.  Sony took the opportunity to increase its brand loyalty by introducing its

own branded "The Official Sony PlayStation Magazine" or PSM.  This had been done by Nintendo before,

but Sony used the advantage they had with the CD-ROM drive to distribute game demos and bonuses

that could be used on the system.  At the time, no other game console had successfully attempted such

a marketing strategy.  At this time, the internet grew in popularity as well.  With the introduction of

internet chat rooms and forums, the video game culture left the privacy of the home and entered the

public domain where people can discuss everything from technical specifications to foods consumed

when playing.  Now, every major gaming website, including Gamespot, IGN, 1up.com, and Game

Informer all have some time of forum where people can post questions and comments.  Sony has also

implemented the forum feature into its own website.  I took a look at several of these forums and found

that people are very passionate about their video games.  Many defended a specific system or game

while others denounced them.  Collectible versions of games, action figures, clothes, have all become

part of the video game culture, and Sony has found a way to tap into all of them in order to create a

market full of loyal fans who will chuck up the $600 required to purchase their latest console, the

PlayStation 3 (PS3).

# The Apple iPod

During the 1990's Sony was experiencing unparalleled success.  Everybody had a Walkman, their electronics were regarded among the best in production, and with the Sony PlayStation, and Sony had branded itself as the company that you could go to in order to purchase everything for your new lifestyle.   At this point, Sony enjoyed the ability to rely on the products and the collective cultural knowledge of its products to sell units.  People simply *knew* the name Sony.  Sony began to relax on their marketing expenditures, as television advertisements and print ads were scaled down.  They continued to innovate their existing products, but failed to bring newer concepts to the market.  By 2000, there existed several iterations of the Walkman branded CD players, cassette recorders, minidisc players, DAT and mini cassette voice recorders, and even a few Sony Ericsson cellular telephones.  Anything that Sony could slap "Walkman" on would sell.

This all changed, however, on October 23, 2001, when CEO of Apple Steve Jobs introduced the Apple iPod.  The first iPod was a 5 gigabyte hard drive based music player.  It was marketed as "1,000 songs in your pocket."  At the time, it was only compatible with Apple computers, and dongs were transferred with a fire wire cable.  Apple supported the iPod with a large and complex marketing strategy.  The most memorable iPod commercials were their television ads, which were very colorful and energetic.  They showed young people, dancing around and having fun.  Apple was successful in creating space for their product in an otherwise dominated market and appealed to a very large audience.  Their ease of use coupled with the energetic marketing campaigns built a platform for Apple to increase its market share not in the portable electronics industry, but increased awareness and exposure to other Apple branded products.  The iPod allowed Apple to expand beyond computers and monitors, to music jukeboxes, media centers, and now even smart phones.

People began to put down their "old" Walkmans to pick up the new "cool" iPods. People liked that they no longer had to change tapes or carry around a case of compact discs. They could carry their entire music library with them wherever they went. As a result, the iPod replaced the Walkman at the product that people used in order to maintain their private space within the public space. Michael Bull accurately describes how the iPod operates to create private space when he says, "The creation of a personalized soundworld through iPod use creates form of accompanied solitude for its uses in which they feel empowered, in control and self-sufficient as they travel through the spaces of the city" (Bull, 2005). On April 23, 2003 Apple introduced iTunes which is an online music store. They sell individual songs as well as albums. In 2005, iTunes began distributing video through the service as well. When iTunes was released, Apple saw the sales of their iPods dramatically increase, along with the sales of Apple computers. Since 2004, the iPod has maintained over ninety percent of the market share of hard drive-based music players and seventy percent for all players. In January 2007, Apple reported quarterly earnings of $7.1 billion. iPods have also taken a step further than creating private space in public. They are not being implemented to serve other functions, not planned for by many. For example, many colleges, such as Duke University, are distributing iPods to their incoming freshmen. Podcasts, recorded audio broadcasts are now being used for instruction in the classroom as well as tools for student presentations. Students and teachers are now recording lectures, lessons, findings, creative music, and other works in order to be distributed using Podcasts (Vess, 2006). Innovations such as these create more of a demand for Apple's product and spell doom for the Walkman brand.

Sony tried to answer the iPod by releasing its own hard drive-based media player, and online music store, Sony Connect, but failed to make a dent in the market share. Since the introduction of the iPod, Sony has seen a drop off in the sales of its music players. "Walkman" is no longer a strong enough term to illicit an impulse to buy. What once was a brand that was highly regarded in our culture as cool and cutting-edge technology is now seen as passé. When customers come into the store and see

a Sony MP3 player, they now say, "Wow, I like that iPod" or "Where are you guys' iPods?"

# The Sony Style Store

Working at the Sony Style retail store has really changed my perception of Sony as an electronics manufacturer and as a business.  In this section I will outline some of the history, goals, and practices of the Sony Style stores.  I will discuss what Sony Styles stores truly are and what they mean in today's culture.

There are two major forms of electronic retail stores.  The first of which is the type that we are most familiar with.  These are the Best Buys and Circuit City's, the Fry's Electronics and Comp USA's.  These stores have a large corporate business structure.  These stores operate buy purchasing large bulk amounts from distributors and directly from manufacturers at deep discounts.  By purchasing at tremendous discounts allow them to leverage their operating overhead costs such as employee wages, merchant fees, building costs, and others in order to be able to pass savings on to the customer.  Because of a nearly uniform product offering at many of these places, they compete primarily with each other on the prices that they present to the end user.  Service has been, at this type of retailer, in practice, of an afterthought than an integral part of the business model and plan.  They are designed to allow the customers to come in, select what they want, pay less than the manufacturer's suggested retail price, and leave.  Associates are present to answer questions and provide service, but are often pressured to meet a quota or sell a particular product, both of which compromise the soundness of the advice and level of service that an associate is allowed to give.  Some companies are very large and are able to exercise monopsomy power.  Having monopsomy is very similar to monopoly power, but works on the opposite side of the supply chain.  In a monopoly, a company has the option to control prices

charged to the customers because of there are very few competitors offering the same of similar products or services.  In a monopsomy, the company is so important to their suppliers they are able to control the price that they pay for bulk items because the supplier dependant on that contract to stay in business.  One such company that has been able to do this is Wal-Mart.  Wal-Mart is able to provide low prices because they have a very meticulate system that controls ordering, sales, and warehousing.

The other major form of electronics stores is the small, "mom and pop" style.  This style carries a much smaller selections of products, but the people who works there are very knowledgeable about what they carry.  Mom and pop stores usually appeal to a smaller audience who want the attention and sound advice that is available in a more intimate environment.  Often also, the product line carried at these places is of a higher quality or more exclusive than what is carried at the larger retailers who try to appeal to the masses.  The prices here are normally higher, as the company does not have the financial ability to purchase large volumes of stock.   Although the prices are higher, because the service is usually much better, and the environment appeals to both enthusiasts and people who have numerous questions, the customers can be served well and these companies stay in business because of that.

Sony introduced a newer type of electronics retail store, merging the concepts between both the larger retailers and the "mom and pop" stores in 2004.  Sony set out to introduce a store that was Sony branded, provided an intimate atmosphere, sold upscale Sony electronics, and knowledgeable sales people that could give sound advice and build relationships with the customers.  We learned in the two weeks prior to opening the store, that the aesthetics of the store were crucial to the Sony Style atmosphere.  Sony Style places a much greater emphasis on the appearance of the store than most other electronic retailers.  All of the furniture is custom made for the stores in order to create exclusivity and uniqueness.  The products are set on pedestals colored to match various themes.  Live bamboo plants are encased in glass rectangular vases throughout the store and are cared for very carefully.  For example, at least once a month, the bamboos are removed from the vases to have their roots cleaned.

Then the vases and clear marbles that are used for decoration are removed and cleaned as well to maintain a sparkling appearance.  The first thing that a person sees upon entering a Sony Style store is the concierge desk, which is decorated with glass and felt banners that twist into the ceiling spelling out "Sony Style."  Standing at the concierge desks is the store's concierge whose job looks simple but is many folds.  They are to greet each and every individual as they enter the store, give hourly sales updates, notify the crew of items that need to be replenished on the floor, and other secretarial tasks. They are stressed as being one of the most important people in the store, because this is the first person that a customer interacts with and because first impressions are highly emphasized.  Large flat-panel liquid crystal display televisions are displayed on high class stands in the store windows.  Above these televisions are posters of newly released or upcoming movies made by Sony.  Also in plain view of the window are various products such as Sony Ericsson mobile phones, the Sony Reader, and notebooks computers in various colors. The floor is mostly carpeted with grey carpet that matches the banners in the front.  Special sections exist throughout the store and are equipped with black tile that break up the carpet.  There is a demo room in the very back of the store where some of the largest televisions are on display and are hooked up to surround sound theater speaker systems.  Nothing in the store is displayed in a plain fashion.  Plants, wall decorations, chairs, posters, and other accents are strategically located in order to create a store that feels more like an art museum.  By creating this art museum kind of feel, the products are seen as pieces of art that should be admired and respected, rather than just another item to box up and ship out of the door.

Every item that in the Sony Style stores are actual "live" models, not dummy units that serve only as displays.  The mobile phones are completely working models that are ready to go.  There are no hollow television sets, no cardboard cutouts, and no oversized plastic models of anything.  Many places showcase display units like this to serve as an icon for the actual product.  The Sony Style stores are different in that they encourage the customers to fulfill their curiosity by actively touching, playing, and

familiarizing themselves with the products.  One of the first things I did upon getting hired was ask the store manager to tell me the mission of Sony Style.  He told me that, simply put, "the goal of Sony Style stores is to further the Sony brand."  According to him, whether a person purchases a Sony product at the Sony Style store or not, is not the primary focus.  Basically, we, as sales associates, are simply supposed to inform the customers, answer any questions they may have, and have the customer leave feeling good about coming in, whether they buy something or not.  As long as the customer at least has a positive attitude towards Sony after leaving the Sony Style store, no matter where they buy the Sony product, we have done our job.  I learned from this that the shopping experience at Sony Style retails stores is intended to be largely experiential.  Revenue, traffic, conversion ratios, and other indicators of successful financial business were not expressed.  I was relieved to be in a retail environment that did not place total emphasis on meeting sales goals.

The work experience that I had at Sony Style changed over time and for various reasons.  The pay scale is fairly competitive for a retail environment.  Again, I was working part-time, so I could not really expect a substantial amount of money in any case.  For the people working full time, the pay is about average for experienced sales associates.  Although the pay scale is average for the industry, the net income sales associates make are less than the average.  This is because there is not commission granted based on product sales.  Commission is only received on the sales of "Sony Service Plans" or extended warranty plans, and even still, the percentage of commission paid is not substantial.  For me, however, the pay was not the main focus, as I simply did not want to be in an environment that was smothered with pressure to sale products and so competitive that going to work would become a chore. The uniform is black pants, undershirt, socks, and shoes along with a company-issued long-sleeved blue shirt.  The shirts are reminiscent of what could be found on the set of Star Trek.  The store opened in mid-March, and we were all excited to be part of such a monumental opening.  All of the management and sales associates were ready to open the store and build relationships with each other and our

customers.  The first few days and weeks were a little rough, as could be expected for a new store.  We ran into snags here and there and had problems with the point of sale systems and we were not entirely familiar with Sony's protocols for various store operations.  After we overcame these issues, the experience was actually pretty good.  The employees all got along, sales were fairly good, and we were receiving constant praise for our customers.  We all felt connected to our work and felt good after engaging and having conversations with the patrons who came into the store.  The lack of pressure that we felt that we absolutely had to close the sale allowed for a very relaxed and easy-going atmosphere.  There was nobody who attacked a customer the second they walked into the store, there was little to no deception involved in sales pitches, and customers enjoyed coming into a store where they were treated as a person and not another number.  Personally, I enjoyed going to work and went home feeling good about the day's work.  If I could describe the culture of the workplace at that time, I would say that it is a group of people who all like electronics who come together to have fun and educate other people about high end electronics.

This culture quickly changed as changes were introduced by management.  The lack of pressure and necessity to meet specific sales goals disappeared and we were slowly introduced to the systems that Sony Style has in order to measure sales performance.  While some of these systems were already in place, there was not a strong emphasis to make this our main focus.  They had been previously explained to us to serve only as indicators, not actual focal points.  Some of these to this day, I do not know what caused the sudden change in operations, but it was not very welcome among the staff.  I will now briefly describe two systems that began to be heavily implemented about one month after the store opened.  Two systems that are heavily enforced within the company are "G.U.I.D.E." and "E.D.R." These systems serve as general guidelines on how Sony Style wants its employees to interact with the customers.  "G.U.I.D.E." is an acronym for the following:

- **Greet** the customer.

- **Use** open-ended questions & closed-ended questions to determine the Customer's needs (qualifying).

- **Inform** the customer of items to fulfill their needs.

- **Determine** customer's add-on needs.

- **Extend** the transaction/sale with a thank you and an invite back.

"E.D.R." is an acronym for the following:

- **Engage**

- **Disengage**

- **Reengage**

"GUIDE" and "EDR" were taught during training, but were practically never mentioned afterwards, while the culture was more relaxed. The customers were engaged by the associates and dialogue was taking place naturally. If the customer said that they were "just looking" or something along those lines, we extended an option for them to ask us if they needed anything, and they did. When "GUIDE" became more of a focus, the interactions became more uncomfortable for both the employees and associates as the exchange now seemed more forced and awkward, rather than a friendly one that could occur naturally. Both systems have the potential to work tremendously, when used correctly, but the fact that we were constantly watched and asked to reengage people that were obviously not ready or wanting to be reengaged proved is counterproductive. We were actually told that we needed to overcome the objection, "No thanks, I'm just looking," by guiding the customer to the "Wow product of the week," the product that Sony was trying to promote at any particular time. This was not at all successful as it made the associates very uncomfortable and the patrons, who were actually just looking or wanting to experience the product and are now being told to look at something, became irritated. GUIDE and EDR turned out to be examples of systems that simply do not work when it is strictly enforced over all else. It forced interactions that made both the associate and the customer not want to be involved in the

situation.  Sales were markedly low and employee morale began to sink when this emphasis was implemented.  Shortly after, during a store meeting, the concern over guide was brought to light.  One of my fellow sales associates said that it was simply too weird and forceful to actually put the systems to use the way we were being told.  The management began to lessen the amount they stressed GUIDE and EDR, but began to focus on K.P.I. or key performance indicators.  These key indicators are extended service plan percentage (ESP percentage), average dollar per transaction (ADT), and units per transaction (UPT).  These percentages and numbers indicate how well we the store is doing as far as sales are concerned, but where this brings up a problem is that it does not coincide with the mission statement.  If Sony Style is intended to increase the awareness, knowledge, and positive perception of the brand, then ratios, percentages, and numbers need to be created in order to measure the effectiveness that the company has on that.  Since the emphasis has changed, the entire atmosphere has become negative.  The associates feel as if the management is either incompetent of not being truthful, the desire to work is gone, and just about everybody is seeking new employment. This is neither good for the store nor for the people that shop there.  There has been a decline in the amount of sales that are closed and the quality of service that is being administered.  An article was released in the New York Times by Randall Stross describing how Sony just does not seem to know how to make retail work.  In this article he mentions how the Sony has put a great deal of emphasis on the design of the store, actually too much so.  He also goes on to say, "A group of five young salesmen and saleswomen who stood near the door when I entered were so engaged in a private, and apparently amusing, discussion that my imploring presence failed to draw anyone's attention" (Stross, 2007).  Sony has since taken action, stating that the allegations made by Mr. Stross are false and has asked for him to make a retraction before further legal actions are taken.  However, from my experiences, Stross' statements are not far from the truth.

# Conclusion

I held out hope for Sony Style because the name brought ideas of a company that excels in everything they do. I am leaving Sony Style feeling happy that I decided long ago not to make retail my career choice. Financially, the stores are not making a great amount of money, but the purpose of Sony's stores is not to bring in revenue. They basically serve as another marketing tool for Sony to try to maintain market share in the electronics industry as competitors begin to make high quality products and lower prices. I have learned that Sony does not make the best product in any category. They make nice products, design it so that it can be seen as a furniture piece rather than a box of copper and plastic, and market them as products that appeal to an upper-middle class clientele. IN an age of internet purchases, comparison shopping, and relationship pricing, retail stores are becoming less of a necessity for completing transactions. Now people are coming into stores for different reasons. Sony stores and Apple stores create a unique experience because people can enter the store and know that they will be around people who they share at least something in common, their appreciation for a specific brand. People want to come in and touch things, see how they work, and see what is coming. Companies such as Apple have taken advantage of watching the market and delivering what people want. Sony has been creating products and them marketing them as something that people want. As consumers become more aware of their options, Sony is going to have to evolve its strategy in order to remain competitive.

# Works Cited

Bull, M. (2005). No Dead Air! The iPod and the Culture of Mobile Listening. *Leisure Studies* , 343-355.

Chen, S.-L. (1998). Electronic Narcisism: College Students' Experiences of Walkman Listening. *Human Sciences Press, Inc.* , 255-276.

Gay, P. d., Hall, S., Janes, L., Mackay, H., & Negus, K. (1997). *Doing Cultural Studies: The Story of the Sony Walkman.* Thousand Oaks, California, United States: Sage.

IIE Manufacturing Engineer. (2004). Special Report: Technology & Innovation. *IEE Manufacturing Engineer* , October-November.

MacKenzie, A. (2000). Losing Time at the PlayStation: Realtime Individuation and the Whatever Body. *Cultural Values* , 257-278.

Stross, R. (2007). *Apple's Lesson for Sony's Stores: Just Connect.* New York: The New York Times.

University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, News Bureau. (1996, May-June). The Walkman Workplace. *The Futurist* , p. 7.

Vess, D. (2006). History to Go: Why iTeach with iPods. *Society for History Education* , 479-492.