

Chapter Three

Money for Nothing

Europe had a tightly regulated broadcast spectrum, no cable penetration and satellite dishes were considered a blight on the cultural landscape. There was very little marketing outside the mainstream channels. And then came MTV Europe. It is fair to say that true consumer engagement for youth brands began with MTV.

—Matthew Freud, Chairman, freud communications

MTV Europe was an experiment. No one would know whether the concept of a single channel broadcasting across Europe was viable until we went out and tried to sell advertising. There were people at Viacom in New York who argued that it would be considerably less expensive to simply direct the American feed to Europe rather than funding a new channel. So I was aware that we had an undetermined but limited timeframe in which to prove we could be profitable. The clock was running. I had no choice but to rely on my time management lesson: Prioritize!

My first day on the job had been about securing distribution. My second day was about generating revenue. That second morning, Frank Brown and I made a presentation to Columbia Studios. HBO hadn't run commercials, so I'd had no experience selling advertising. But as always, when making a sales pitch I tried to be enthusiastic, compelling, and convincing—even if I wasn't completely certain what I was trying to

convince Columbia to do. On occasion, it's possible to make up in enthusiasm and confidence what you lack in specific knowledge.

Unlike in the United States, where basic-cable channels have at least two revenue streams, at least initially we were going to have to rely mostly on advertising revenue. And we were a tough advertising sell. The idea of a pan-European media business was new. The few media companies that had dipped a toe into that water had failed miserably. Even those few companies that did market a product across Europe generally had nation-specific brands. The same product would have a different name in a different language in each European country. It might even have a different use. As a director at a major London advertising agency told a reporter for a trade publication, "It's no good advertising something on MTV that doesn't sell on a pan-European basis."

What made it even more difficult for us was the reality that we did not have enough households in any single country to justify national advertising, and the advertising industry in Europe was not set up to buy the entire continent. Instead, each nation had its own advertising industry designed specifically to sell products directly to its citizens—and in some eastern European nations, Russia for instance, there was no advertising industry at all. The job title, "European Marketing Director," did not exist in advertising. In fact, I don't remember meeting a single person in the advertising industry who had the authority to make a pan-European buy. Agency budgets were set at a local level, so to convince any client to spend on a centralized level we had to get tremendous cooperation. For some consumer products as many as 50 different marketing managers each would have to agree to contribute a portion of his or her national ad budget before the company would make a pan-European buy. The process of getting a consensus was incredibly labor intensive and time consuming. Generally, these managers resisted having their decision-making power taken away.

Being a pioneer is never an easy trek. As I had often heard John Malone say, "Pioneers often end up with arrows in their back." Over and over I sent out our reps with the slogans by which we lived, "Aggressive, relentless, and creative," and "Don't take 'No' for an answer." We were not a traditional company, so traditional strategies wouldn't work for us. If the advertising agencies wouldn't support us, we bypassed the agencies and went directly to chief executives of fashion, lifestyle, technology, fast-food,

and soft-drink companies that marketed directly to our audience. As our director of advertising sales, Bruce Steinberg, explained, “We had to go to the clients and the ad agencies in each of the countries in which they operated and convince them that MTV was an effective buy in comparison to their national TV. . . . Each country’s contribution is based on how many homes we have in their country. If 10 percent of our network is in the U.K., then 10 percent of the budget should be from the U.K.”

We had identified our weaknesses, but we focused on our strengths. Telling the story you want potential clients to hear is always a good strategy. What we did have was a sexy brand; we were the only youth-positioned channel and we worked hard to create a buzz. The pitch we made to potential advertisers was that we could reach that elusive young consumer they were chasing better than any other media outlet. If you wanted to market to young Europeans you had to be on MTV. We emphasized our belief that music was global, and that while our audience might live in many different countries they all listened to the same music, wore essentially the same type of clothes, went to the same movies, ate the same fast foods, and drank the same beverages. We claimed that even though our audience was spread over many countries it actually was more homogeneous than a mass audience in any specific country. We were the meeting place for the young people of Europe. Our unique selling proposition (our USP) was that we were offering a larger audience than they could reach in any single country, all of whom were potential customers. We made a compelling argument—combined with the fact that we kept our advertising rates low. In some instances we were charging less than half of what commercial stations in the U.K. were charging.

That was our pitch, although initially we couldn’t prove the size of our audience. The advertising world now has access to an extraordinary array of statistics. But two decades ago there was no pan-European research being done. Beyond the number of people watching at any time and their age group, not too much was known about an audience. Because we didn’t have statistical evidence to support our claims, we emphasized the tremendous popularity of MTV USA, which was perceived by American companies to be this really sexy, exciting brand that you’d better be part of if you wanted to sell your product to kids. Many of those same multinational companies advertising in America took for granted the fact that eventually the same thing would happen with MTV in Europe.

We did, however, come to rely on focus groups for feedback. We brought in a lot of young people and we listened to their responses. They gave us some important directional tones. I made a point of observing as many of these groups as possible and we often used their comments—“Everybody’s watching MTV,” “MTV is cool”—in our sales pitches.

Eventually, though, advertisers did want to see evidence that we were reaching their audience. I have often quoted the legendary retailer John Wanamaker, who said a century ago, “Half the money I spend on advertising is wasted; the trouble is I don’t know which half.” What do you do when you don’t have a research unit capable of measuring your audience? In our case, we created one. In effect we commissioned our own research. We joined with several other channels to create and fund an entirely independent organization called Pan European Television Audience Research (PETAR). It was basically the European version of America’s Nielsen ratings. The advertising side supported it strongly, but the programming side was concerned that our quest for numbers might take away their independence. PETAR conducted two surveys annually. Twice a year it would measure our viewership for one week, and during that week, sweeps week, like every other channel we would do anything to boost our ratings. In media today, the concept of advertisers buying time based on research conducted twice a year is laughable. But that’s all we had available to us.

To attract wary advertisers we created a dynamic environment. We actually began running high-quality Coke ads for free—although few people besides me knew we were doing this. Coke was doing a small amount of advertising with us, but I gave them a major amount of commercial time. To this day I don’t know if Coke was aware of it. I’ve worked with a long succession of chief marketing officers at Coke, from Bill Lynn to Joe Tripodi and his deputy Scott McCune, and have never admitted it to one of them. We actually did that with several prestige brands. At one point we probably were broadcasting more unpaid commercials than paid advertisements. That’s the kind of strategy you can get away with only in an entrepreneurial situation. It was a gamble but I believed it was absolutely necessary. When developers build a shopping center they begin by attracting one high-quality tenant, believing it will draw similar stores. That’s all I was doing. I wanted potential advertisers who

marketed to the same demographic as Coke to see that Coke believed we were a sensible buy. We ran Coke commercials that had a high production quality so other brands would want to be associated with them—and MTV.

I also knew that the best strategy in negotiating with a market leader is to get a deal done with its primary competition. That's true in just about every product category. If you have Coke as an advertiser, for example, you're going to get Pepsi. In our case, Coke was the bait and we used it.

To accommodate potential advertisers we broke the traditional rules, creating a unique and flexible advertising environment. When I was at HBO I saw that the once-impregnable wall between ad sales and editorial content was beginning to come down. Time Inc. emphasized editorial integrity, which was referred to as “church and state,” but I saw it eroding. At HBO, boxing was an important part of our programming. Mike Tyson was practically a franchise property for us; he brought in ratings—and a week or so before a championship bout *Time* magazine put him on its cover. Everybody at Time was aware of this “coincidence” and all of us at HBO were very happy about it, but nobody said a word out loud about it. Admittedly, when I got to London I knocked down what was left of that wall. Today, there is no hesitancy about cross-promoting different media properties. Nor is there any concern about it from the audience. The word used to describe it is *synergy*—although at that point no one understood what “synergy” really meant. For example, Time Inc. tried to launch a cable version of *TV Guide* called *TV Cable Week* in an attempt to unite its print and video divisions. It lasted less than six months and lost almost \$80 million.

We blended our advertising and programming, calling it *integrated marketing*. I didn't think there was anything wrong with it. It has become an important revenue source for broadcasters. MTV Europe wasn't a news channel; we were providing entertainment. We didn't have to be neutral. We attracted clients by creating programming that was relevant to our audience and enhanced their product. *The Pulse with Swatch*, for example, was a monthly program about fashion. *The Coca Cola Report* reported about music and music industry gossip, the arts, concerts, and tour news. My programming people hated sponsor-titled shows like the *Coca Cola Show*. That caused a huge fight inside the company. They felt we were selling out, diluting the brand. I listened sympathetically to their arguments. I understood their point and agreed with much of it, but ultimately I went with the branding. As the CEO responsible for growing the business, “selling out”

had a very different meaning. It meant selling out all of our advertising time, and we were a long way from doing that. As I pointed out, if we weren't profitable we wouldn't be around to even have this debate.



We didn't break down the wall; we walked a tightrope. Unlike most broadcasters, we weren't simply selling ad spots. Instead we integrated entire marketing campaigns into our programming, which included running creative idents at the beginning and end of programs. Nobody in media was doing anything like this. We tried to blend our advertising and programming in clever, creative ways. Rather than making black-and-white decisions, as had been the tradition at Time Inc., instead we tried to find shades of gray that were acceptable to everyone.

Ad sales and programming were always fighting about this. Brent Hansen was a purist; he wanted as little advertising as possible on the channel, while our advertising group wanted to sell the light fixtures. This was a fight that never ended; the creative side always wanted to put the chicken before the egg, while the commercial people wanted to put the egg before the chicken. I came down firmly in the middle. I knew we couldn't sell advertising without a strong creative product and we couldn't afford creative programming unless we sold advertising.

Hansen was adamant that becoming too advertising-oriented would alienate our audience and damage our brand. At times he simply refused to run certain spots. For example, Braun electronics, one of our first substantial advertisers, wanted to convert the title sequence of a show it sponsored into an ad. They wanted to bleed out of their commercial directly into the programming, believing that would strengthen the connection in the viewer's mind between Braun and the program.

It was an interesting idea—but in the title sequence they wanted to include product shots, including a hair dryer. Brent's team refused to run product shots in the opening. Eventually we worked out a compromise; rather than products we ran fashion and cosmetic images that the viewer could relate to. It didn't work well for either us or the sponsor. When our creative team and our advertising staff couldn't resolve a situation, I stepped in to mediate quickly and firmly.

Generally, though, we managed to find ways to blend advertising and our programming. Both at MTV Europe and in the United States we broadcast *Dial MTV*, a video request show sponsored by Pepsi. When viewers called in to request a specific video we allowed Pepsi to conduct its own survey. In 1996, we signed a three-year multimillion-dollar worldwide deal with Pepsi that included program advertising, cross-promotions, marketing tie-ins, and large-scale events featuring our VJs. It made Pepsi the exclusive soft-drink sponsor (meaning no Coke) of our *Video Music Awards*.

Movie studios were extremely important advertisers for us. They had large advertising budgets and we shared the same audience. So we created two programs specifically to attract them; *MTV at the Movies* and *The Big Picture*, which were essentially the same show. *MTV at the Movies* was a daily half-hour show that included news, interviews, and reviews, with much of the news supplied to us by the studio's PR departments. We interviewed the stars and showed clips of their new movie, exactly what the late-night talk shows do, although we took it to a new level. *The Big Picture* was also a half hour and featured trailers from new movies—trailers that were supplied to us by the studios. These movie shows achieved two important objectives for us: Our audience was interested in movies and movie stars and accepted these shows as entertainment rather than advertising, and there was no resistance from the creative side on this (probably because we didn't call these shows *The Columbia Pictures Movie Show*). But these shows were really long commercials for the studios, and I thought it was a clever and effective way to solidify deals with clients.

In 1989 it was advertising from the studios that helped us survive. We needed that advertising desperately. I remember making those sales calls on the studios with Frank Brown. Frank is the most articulate, effective salesperson I've ever known, and I have great respect for him, but one day I really came down hard on him. Having lived in Los Angeles I knew how awful the traffic could be, but he didn't listen to me and scheduled two meetings without leaving sufficient travel time. To me, being late for a meeting with a client was the worse thing that could happen, and on the way to that second meeting we got caught in that traffic. As if it wasn't bad enough for Frank to be caught in a massive traffic jam, he had to sit there for an hour listening to me loudly lecturing him.

To increase our visibility in the movie industry we began sending our VJs to the major film festivals, especially Cannes. Cannes, of course, is the most important film market and we started throwing an annual party there. By the mid-1990s the MTV party had earned a reputation as the hottest party at the festival, the one that everybody wanted to attend. *The Hollywood Reporter* used to rate our parties “Three cocktails!” People literally would climb walls to try to crash a party. They would form large groups and try to overwhelm front-door security. We held several parties at Pierre Cardin’s villa, which was built on the side of a cliff, and people actually would scale the craggy cliff trying to sneak in. In 1996 a young man named Dave Sibley joined MTV Europe as head of sponsored events and one of his first events was a party in that villa to celebrate the animated film *Beavis and Butt-Head Do America*. We lost control of that party early, and Dave retreated to the VIP room determined to maintain control there. I remember walking by him as he was pushing against the door while a mob was shoving from outside trying desperately to break in. It was like a scene from a movie; hands literally were reaching inside. Later he told me he was terrified when he saw me, believing his first event was a total disaster. Of course, he was new to MTV. In the midst of that chaos, as I walked by, I said the three words that he later told me were the best words he ever heard: “Dave! Great party!”

One year we held the party on the beach across from the Hotel Carlton and it was so crowded, Security wouldn’t even let me in. I had to go around back and sneak into my own party.

People tried various strategies to get inside. They would produce elaborately counterfeited invitations or even impersonate stars. If Robin Williams was in Cannes to promote a new film, for example, a limo would pull up and a person who in bad light remotely resembled him would get out and try to bluff his way in. And there were occasional fights; I can remember a security guard leaping out of a second-story window into a melee—and breaking both ankles.

We didn’t want to be just another broadcaster covering the festival; we became an integral part of the festival. For a small operation, we had a large presence. We set up shop at the Hotel du Cap, the most glamorous hotel in Cannes, and eventually we became the absolutely essential stop for any producer, director, or actor promoting a movie.

We established a wonderfully symbiotic relationship with the studios, even stronger than we had with the record industry. The studios supplied

their stars to us, which enabled us to draw a viewing audience that wanted to see those stars, which in turn made us attractive to other advertisers, and then our audience went to see those movies. In fact, MTV eventually became so important to the studios that they changed their traditional release pattern in Europe. Rather than rolling out a film country by country across the continent as they had always done, they instead coordinated a narrow pan-European release window to take advantage of MTV's promotion. As the European head of publicity for one of the major studios told *The Hollywood Reporter*, "MTV is providing strong editorial support aimed directly at the profile of European moviegoers. Their [programming] has a substantial rating and is targeted directly at our consumers."

We created the art of integrated marketing. We worked with our advertisers to create commercials that looked very similar to the videos we were running, so those ads flowed almost seamlessly into our programming. In some instances we actually behaved like a pan-regional advertising agency, working with clients to produce their commercials. This was another service that no channel had ever offered before. For example, in 1989, Nike signed a three-year deal with us. Rather than create their own advertising, David Flack, one of our top creative people, designed a billboard opening for them that showed the Nike Swoosh while audio from one of Nike's priority sports—tennis, football, golf—played in the background. It was brilliant in its simplicity and Nike loved it.

Rather than offering only strict 15- or 30-second spots for commercials, we encouraged advertisers to sponsor specific programming, allowing them to attach their brand to segments: "This video is brought to you by Swatch"; "This tour report is brought to you by Wrangler." We tried to be as flexible as possible, offering to create tailor-made campaigns to meet their needs. Advertisers loved it; it gave them a chance to directly associate their product with artists they otherwise could never afford. "We offer a broad range of promotional opportunities for potential advertisers. Our programming format is very friendly to advertisers," I pointed out, "because it tends to be in short spurts and if you have a commercial in an MTV style, it blends very well with the programming format."

Out of necessity, we changed the way television advertising traditionally had been sold in Europe, working with companies to create platforms that went far beyond commercials. For example, when Pepsi signed on to sponsor M.C. Hammer's European tour, we collaborated on

a promotional program. In addition to covering the tour on our shows, we ran specially produced commercials that featured M.C. Hammer and we even conducted an on-air competition in which the prize was an opportunity to dance with Hammer. We were always conducting some kind of competition to draw viewers. In addition to giving away substantial prize money, other contests offered an opportunity to cruise down the Nile with Tom Petty or spend several days on tour with Sting in Scandinavia.

At times we succeeded so well that critics complained, “The entire MTV network is an advertising program.”

It worked—even better than we had anticipated. In 1989, there were no pan-European advertisers; within a year we had signed 45 regular advertisers. A year later we had more than 130 clients, among them Coke and Pepsi, Levi’s and Wrangler, Nike and Reebok, Swatch, LA Gear, Kodak and Pentax, Mastercard and Visa, Phillips and Braun, and IBM and Apple. As much as 90 percent of our revenue was derived from advertising. While we had successfully created a new advertising model, selling it involved good old-fashioned hard work.

In fact, our formula worked so well that we were able to move faster than our projections. Noting our success throughout Europe, other broadcasters began copying our music video format. In fact, many of the same videos we were showing were also being shown on other channels. While the programming quality of most of MTV’s competitors was low, they did create confusion among the audience. When a video was playing there was no way for the viewer to know which channel he or she was watching. To combat that, I focused on building very strong brand recognition. MTV was a very well-recognized brand in the United States, but initially much less so in Europe.



There is nothing more important to a product than building brand recognition. In the United States, I’d noticed, when I zapped through the channels each of them seemed to be distinct. That was less true in Europe. Often our channel was at the end of the spectrum and there was nothing

that instantly distinguished us from our competition. That became a problem during the twice-annual PETAR surveys when it was essential that our viewers knew they were watching MTV. We ran contests to draw viewers and flooded the channel with promotional images; but if viewers were channel surfing, they might miss those promos, so we needed a means of providing instant recognition. To ensure that our viewers always knew they were watching MTV, we broke another rule. We decided to put our logo in the corner of the screen and leave it there. No one had ever done that before. Now, of course, imposing a channel logo over programming is pretty much standard. But we started it. This logo is not to be confused with the creatively brilliant interstitial logos that MTV had started running in the States. Those were animated, wild, colorful morphing images that helped establish the creative brand for the channel. Our on-screen logo was small and very crude, just a block-letter *M* with *TV* written in script over it. Initially we even kept it on the screen during commercials. It wasn't particularly visual or colorful. But we did it first so viewers would know instantly they were watching MTV.

In my quest to bring some business structure to our creative chaos we held a weekly management meeting at which we discussed strategy and made decisions. That way everyone knew what was going on and had an opportunity to voice their opinion. It was one way of getting everyone to buy into our objectives. Leaving the logo on the screen was a controversial decision and we debated it. And as we often did in those days, we debated it loudly. A lot of our creative and programming people were adamantly opposed to putting our brand on content. They believed it was too obvious, definitely uncool, and an unnecessary distraction. They were passionate about keeping the channel pure and viewer-friendly, pointing out correctly that at times it would obscure information about the video being played. To satisfy their concerns I agreed to an experiment. We would leave it up only during the PETAR survey, and at the end of the month we'd take a look at the result. As it turned out, we received few viewer complaints, and it appeared to increase brand recognition. Among other evidence, when we posted our logo on the screen the number of entries we received in our contests increased measurably. It was clear that keeping the logo on the screen was actually working; viewers found us and stayed there, so I decided to keep it there. I had become a very strong advocate of this.

As a consolation to the creative side I provided the additional funding needed to create a more visually exciting logo. “The bug,” as we called it, eventually progressed from a simple white logo to a three-dimensional, full-color animated logo designed to continually morph into an infinite number of shapes and colors. We left it on the screen all day, every day. It was revolutionary. At times, though, it led to a small infestation of bugs: For example, some stations that carried a block of MTV programming, particularly in eastern Europe, had their own bugs, so often there were two of them on the screen at the same time. In one instance I remember three bugs on the screen and even I thought it might be too much.

I don’t think I’d like my legacy in the television industry to be that I was the man who stuck the logo on the screen and kept it there, but I know it has been effective. It helped us establish our brand in Europe and later throughout the entire world. Viewers knew instantly they were watching MTV, rather than one of our competitors.

MTV’s station identifications also were revolutionary. Traditionally station idents, which MTV was running between videos, had always been static and unimaginative. A station ident is the visual representation of a product, and it should convey in one glance the emotional message the company is trying to communicate: We’re reliable. We’re whimsical. We’re futuristic. We’re fun. Probably the most recognizable ident in America was the CBS eye, while the most creative was NBC’s peacock opening its colorful feathers. We took the concept several steps further. Our idents were works of art. While in the beginning MTV Europe primarily used idents from MTV domestic, eventually we hired the best graphic artists in Europe to create pieces with a European flavor and gave them the freedom to do it. The results were the most visually exciting pieces running on television anywhere in the world and they set a tone and creative standard that has endured. American MTV had set a creative standard—and I believe we met that hurdle and adapted it for Europe. Brent Hansen, described them accurately as “optical attacks” that “made your eyes bleed.”

These on-air idents could be flowing mercury or neon or colors so bright they almost blasted people out of their chairs. They were elaborate, whimsical, startlingly innovative 10- or 15-second computer-generated animated pieces always ending with the creation of a colorful MTV logo. In one of them, for example, a baby in his highchair threw gobs of colorful food directly at the viewer, and the food formed the letters.

Another took place in Hell where prehistoric creatures flew into the form of the logo. “King Kong” featured a film-clip from a 1950s black-and-white horror film in which people are fleeing the approaching monster—which in this case was a giant letter *M*, the legs of which stomped through the city until it hit electrical wires and bolts of electricity formed the *TV*. These idents were unlike anything that ever had been done on European TV. We became an instant trendsetter.

Our logo and station idents became a visual expression of our creativity. We referred to the idents as “the on-air programming look” and we had thousands of them. Brent Hansen correctly pointed out, “Our logo is the biggest star on MTV.” But more importantly, as Hansen added, that logo accurately reflected “in visual language . . . all the different colors and vibes of the audience.”

Our objective was to be the most visually engaging channel in the history of European television. We tried to project our “break-all-the-rules” attitude in everything we put on the air. We knew our audience self-identified as rebellious, irreverent, creative, and connected and we programmed our channel to reflect that. We wanted them to feel this was their channel. Everything from our camera-shots to the way our presenters dressed was fresh and different. Everything was fast-paced, short-form programming—instantly recognizable as MTV. No image stayed on the screen too long. The graphics were bright. Backgrounds were spare. Not your parents’ TV—*yours!* No mistaking it for anything else.

One of the most important decisions about our programming was that it would be in English. I knew we would get pushback on that from countries concerned about being invaded by American culture, but we really didn’t have a choice. We were sending the same signal to numerous countries in which a variety of languages were spoken. English was the lowest common denominator. On occasion we would joke that maybe we should do our shows in Esperanto, which was created to be a one-world language but never really caught on. English successfully crossed more borders than any European language. English is the default language of Europe, the language spoken by most people after their native language. That’s true even in France. A survey conducted before I got there demonstrated that young Europeans believed that when they understood comments in English about a subject they knew, they felt connected to the rest of the world.

English-language music is popular in most parts of the world, while it's rare for songs recorded in languages other than English to sell beyond the borders where that language is spoken. Our VJs all spoke English, although mostly as their second language. They combined English and their native language in a unique way—just as our audience did. In fact, our German VJ, Kristiane Backer, didn't speak English very well at all. Actually, I liked the fact that she struggled with English because I thought that would match our audience and there was something charming about it. Our VJs were taught to speak slowly and distinctly, and they were instructed to avoid trying to make puns or wordplays because most of our audience wouldn't get them.

The government of China would even use our channels, MTV and Nickelodeon, to teach English. More people speak Chinese Mandarin as their primary language than any other language in the world, but the government wanted to promote English as the universal second language. During one of my many trips to China I learned that high school students substantially increased their chances of being accepted to a university if they mastered four skills, one of them being a proficiency in English. In fact, one of the first programs we ran in China was called *MTV English*, which used music videos to teach English. While the video was running, the lyrics were scrolled in English across the bottom of the screen, and the Chinese VJ regularly would stop the music to translate those words.

Although Fidel Castro's Cuba never got its MTV because of the American government's trade restrictions, when I visited there Castro told me he also wanted to use our channels to teach English to the Cuban population.

Whatever language our VJs spoke, if viewers didn't want to watch our product even the most extensive international distribution network in the world wouldn't make any difference. HBO had become a success because we owned that marketplace; if viewers wanted to see first-run movies in their homes, they had few options. By the time competitors like Showtime appeared, we were an established brand. I didn't have that advantage at MTV Europe. Kids had choices, so we had to create a programming environment that was unique, that connected strongly enough with our target audience to bring them back again and again.



Our product was our programming. When I arrived in London, I didn't have the slightest idea about the nuts and bolts of programming a music channel. There was an experienced woman in charge of programming and one of my first decisions was to let her go. She actually was too experienced for our network; if we really intended to break the rules, we needed someone in that position who had not spent her career playing by the rulebook. To succeed, we needed to be different from anything then on the air. I wanted somebody willing to take chances. I settled on a long, curly-haired producer named Brent Hansen, a wildly creative New Zealander with strong opinions and a tremendous knowledge of music. He had even named his daughter, Marley, after Bob Marley. Brent gave the channel its look and feel, I later appointed him to oversee all international programming. But at the beginning we all had to learn the basics. We started with almost an empty slate; we had 24 hours, seven days a week to fill. Programming is a skill and an art, and it can't be learned from memorizing *TV Guide*. A man named Yarl Mohn, who had changed his name to Lee Masters when he was working in radio, was in charge of MTV programming in the United States and at my request he came to England and spent two weeks with me and several of our programming people. We holed up in a little conference room right outside my office for 12 hours a day as Yarl taught us how to program our channel. Yarl looked at the schedule as a pie and taught us how to slice it into a programming grid consisting of commercials, promotions, lead-ins, and all the other segments that fill the day. Eventually we would be programming more than 150 channels 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Obviously some of it was already produced, but undoubtedly it was the most extensive programming output of any media company in history. That started in that conference room with Yarl Mohn, and I was tremendously indebted to him.

While we promoted ourselves as a lifestyle channel, initially we were completely dependent on music videos for our programming. Most of our shows were live, hosted by our diverse group of VJs, and served mostly as the framework that enabled us to put videos into categories. *Club MTV* played dance music. *Headbanger's Ball* played European heavy metal. *Yo!* was our rap show. To break up the blocks of music

video programs we ran a music-and-lifestyle news program, and we had a dance music program, movie programs, a quiz show, a magazine show that reported the latest pop-star gossip and tour news, one minute of pop news every hour, and at least some social awareness programming.

For most corporations public service involvement has never been especially important. MTV was no different. It requires employee time, it takes money, and there are legitimate questions about how valuable it is to the bottom line. Initially it wasn't part of my agenda, and it wasn't on the business plan. I needed to build a profitable business. At that time I didn't envision that MTV would become the leader of the corporate world in the fight against HIV/AIDS.

By 1989, the channel already was running occasional public service spots fighting alcohol abuse and smoking and raising AIDS awareness, issues that impacted our audience. Environmental awareness was a major issue in Europe, so we commissioned 28 of the best directors and production houses in Europe to produce a series of irreverent station idents with an environmental theme. We premiered these pieces during a special Green Weekend, intended to create awareness among our viewers of the problems facing the environment. Some of these spots stretched the accepted boundaries. My favorite was an animated talking turd sitting on a beach under an umbrella urged listeners to keep Europe's beaches clean. For several years we dipped into issues without making them an essential part of the brand. Each year at Christmas, for example, we promoted an album presented by the Shriver family that promoted the Special Olympics. For media companies social awareness campaigns are very tricky. MTV was providing entertainment; if we were going to do public service programming we had to do it in a way that was consistent with our brand. If we preached our audience might change the channel, which would have defeated our purpose. We could present public service programming only after we had firmly established a brand connection. There was no chance MTV could educate anybody if we didn't entertain them first and foremost.

Although our mission was to create a European channel, we also were fortunate to be able to include some American programming. By this time some Europeans had seen pirated versions. We wanted to give them a slice of American culture, but much less than a whole meal. Initially we ran only three shows produced in America: a half hour from NBC's *Saturday Night Live*, which included mostly the music

performances, MTV's *U.S. Top Twenty Countdown*, and *Club MTV* for dance music fans.

Because of the language barriers we focused on music, not talk. It would be stretching the truth to describe our programming as intellectually challenging. In fact *Newsweek* once reported, "For every eco-spot or factoid, there is a deluge of programming as intellectually nutritious as microwave popcorn."

That was fine. We weren't trying to challenge or teach our audience; we wanted to entertain them. For example, we created a European version of the popular MTV USA quiz-show parody, *Remote Control*, on which contestants answered trivia questions about pop culture, picking from categories like "Dead, Alive, or Indian Food?" *Remote Control* was MTV's first long-form show and cost \$17,000 per episode, a large sum at that time. The first show we introduced in Europe, *Buzz*, had a magazine format that included segments like "Fashion," "Lust," and "Sex," and featured fascinating factoids like what Barbie's measurements would be if she were life-sized (39-23-33) and the number of years a Zimbabwean could serve in prison for ridiculing local politicians (not longer than one year and a \$20,000 fine).

We used what little market research capability we had to determine what our consumers wanted to see and hear, and then we gave it to them. And what they wanted to see were music videos and more music videos. In 1989, about 95 percent of our programming was music videos. Generally, we played more than 250 videos every day. While music had always been an important part of my life, I lacked the in-depth knowledge that I thought I needed. Tom Freston introduced me to a radio music programmer, Jeff Pollack, who served as my expert music advisor, and stayed with MTV for two decades. Our most popular videos were replayed as often as 8 to 10 times a day in what was called *heavy rotation*. Selecting those videos was a very competitive process. In less than a decade the music video world had exploded. From a trickle of filmed performances it had become a flood of expensively produced, highly creative short films. Careers were invested in those videos. Each week we would receive as many as 70 new videos from the record companies that were desperate to get them played on MTV. In addition to those official submissions from the labels, we also received inexpensively shot videos in the mail. Wherever I went, people handed me videos and CDs. Once I was on a British Air flight and a flight attendant told me that the captain "needed" to speak with me. That was unusual. I was

escorted into the cockpit. I wondered what this was all about—until the captain told me that his son was in a band, then handed me a CD and asked for advice. On another occasion, I was in Cuba and someone handed me a video—abd Cuba didn't even have MTV! That experience was common for everyone who worked at MTV. Even the people who cleaned the office at night would submit videos that friends of friends had asked them to submit. At times it seemed like everyone in the world had a son or a nephew whose band had produced a video. From all those submissions we would select as few as seven of them to add to our weekly playlist.

Having their videos selected for our playlist was vital to the record companies. There was a direct relationship between the number of plays and album sales. Statistically, the sales of records played in heavy rotation increased by as much as 20 percent. For a new band, having their video played on MTV could make the difference between success and obscurity. We were well aware of our power so we took that selection process very seriously. Videos were the foundation of our programming. We would have two production meetings each week, the first one to pick the new videos, the second to determine the rotation, meaning how often they would get played. We based our choices on several factors, including the Top charts, record sales, and radio play, but eventually it came down to personal tastes.

The first rule of any business is to listen carefully to your customers and then give them what they tell you they want. But we had only limited feedback and to succeed we needed to attract a large audience with a variety of tastes. Our playlist meetings lasted for hours and they were always combative. The people in our talent and music programming department were knowledgeable and passionate about music, they were out at clubs listening to new bands almost every night, and they had strong opinions about what we should be playing. Those meetings often got very emotional; there was a lot of screaming and yelling and even some tears as people fought for their choices. These meetings got very personal at times. There rarely was a unanimous decision. Getting a video you liked played in a heavy rotation was considered a great victory.

Everybody wanted to discover a band popular in one country and introduce it to the rest of Europe. Brian Diamond, who ran Talent Relations and Programming, told them, “The only way we can get people to pay attention to new music is to give the masses the music they

like to hear and then if we sneak in something new they'll give it a test drive. A lot of people in Europe buy five albums a year and go to half a dozen concerts. They'll go to see Roxette or Genesis or Simply Red, so we have to play that music. But if we do play them, we can have some fun with the rest of the playlist and get some new stuff in and maybe those people will pay attention to them."

At the beginning I often attended those meetings. I intended my presence to be the voice of reason, a subtle reminder that we were running a business. While admittedly I probably knew less about music than anyone in the room, I knew what I liked and at times I'd raise my hand and voice my opinion. It did not surprise me that videos I said I liked sometimes ended up in heavy rotation. But after attending half a dozen of these meetings I realized I was making a huge mistake. I was much older than our demographic and my musical tastes were very different. I was skewing the choices older. I was doing precisely what I'd promised myself I wouldn't do: I'd hired people to do a job because I believed they could do that job and I found myself telling them how to do it. So I pulled myself out of those meetings and never went back. As much as I enjoyed being part of that process, I had to remind myself that I was a manager, and I had to delegate decision-making authority to those people I trusted.

But I have never stopped watching new videos and silently picking my personal favorites. The hold that the videos had on me when I first watched them in my Santa Monica apartment never dissipated. I appreciated the effort that went into each one of them. I admired the creativity and I looked forward to seeing the new videos from cutting-edge artists. It's not surprising that I've often been asked to list my favorite videos and I usually avoid doing it. But, after all of these years, after watching thousands of videos, my top 10—in any order—are: A-ha's "Take on Me," R.E.M.'s "Losing My Religion," Fatboy Slim's "Weapon of Choice," Michael Jackson's "Black or White," Madonna's "Like a Prayer," Beyoncé's "Single Ladies," U2's "One," Frankie Goes to Hollywood's "Two Tribes," Lady Gaga's "Bad Romance," and Peter Dinklage's "Sledgehammer." But how could you have a top ten without Dire Straits' "Money for Nothing" and Aqua's "Barbie Girl"? But this list is subject to change, as I still watch and enjoy the videos.

A problem I had to deal with were requests from the friends I'd made in the music industry to intervene for their artists. Some of these

executives were quite upset that 24-year-old “kids” with little experience were making decisions that affected careers. These executives didn’t think it was fair that they would put time and money into breaking an artist and have someone that young determine whether they succeeded. I didn’t pay too much attention to them. When I was 24 years old I was commanding a nuclear missile base, so I had no doubt a 24-year-old could select music, plan an event, or sell advertising. On occasion these executives put me in a difficult position by asking me to promote a particular artist or song. On rare occasions, for the sake of our business and artist relationships, I would very carefully add a video to our playlist.

One of the issues that MTV domestic had faced in the mid-1980s was the accusation that it would not play true black music, the music being played in the streets. Lionel Ritchie’s music got played, Michael Jackson got played, but they were considered mainstream musicians singing pop and ballads rather than black music. Rap was rarely played. The implication was that this was a racial decision. But by the time I got to London MTV domestic was playing all types of music.

Internationally that issue was never raised. One of the questions asked often, both before and after I got there, was how did MTV Europe intend to show that it was not simply the European extension of American MTV? So Europe was compelled to think of ways we could differentiate our channel from MTV domestic. At one of the early meetings of our playlist group the suggestion was made that we do an entire program about rap, which was considered the real black music. By then rap videos were being played domestically and internationally, but no one had done an entire program featuring rap. We created the show *Yo! MTV Raps* in 1989. The problem we had to solve was that few rap videos were being produced. The labels wouldn’t spend the money to make them. *Yo!* changed the climate for rap, introducing it to a lot of Europeans who hadn’t previously been exposed to it. Certainly MTV Europe wasn’t solely responsible for the explosion of hardcore rap, but it did play a significant role in making it happen.

After those first few weeks I got involved in playlist selections only when there was a question about the content. We had guidelines that we fought to uphold. Artists were always trying to push the envelope; some bands were willing to do almost anything to attract attention. We walked a tightrope. Our head of Standards and Practices was a woman named

Rosemary Stocks. She looked more like a conservative librarian than the typical MTV employee, which is what I wanted. Rosemary would review every video. There were disagreements about what was appropriate, but fewer than most people would anticipate.

We didn't want to censor creativity, but we were very sensitive to portrayals of violence, sexism, and racism. Violence was simple; we wouldn't show any videos with guns or knives. But setting guidelines about sex was more complicated. We had to be realistic: Sex sold music. Sex was the subject of countless songs and the undertone of a lot of videos. A lot of rap was very sexually oriented. Europe generally has a more sophisticated attitude about sex than the United States, so we permitted sexual suggestion. Although we didn't permit graphic sex, nudity, or overt sexism, many videos included beautiful, sexy, provocatively dressed women and macho men. It was a wavy line. I was very concerned about this and would often discuss it at great length with Judy McGrath, who was heading MTV in the United States, and Judy was equally troubled by it. There was no simple answer to this, but at Judy's suggestion, when it was possible we emphasized female empowerment. We went through several different phases. Sometimes we would compromise by running a sexy video—but only on late-night shows, after 10 P.M. For example, Madonna's *Justify My Love* video was pretty sexually explicit. We debated whether to run it and finally decided to show it only at night. There were times when the decisions made by our programmers made me a little uncomfortable, but I reminded myself that I was not our audience.

The record companies often produced two videos for the same song, one considerably less risqué than the other. If we turned down the first submission for being too violent or sexy, they would submit the second one. Racism was rarely a problem.

Today those standards seem archaic. In 1989, Cher did a memorable video for a song entitled *If I Could Turn Back Time* in which she was dancing on a battleship, wearing a skimpy, revealing black bodysuit—straddling a huge cannon. Although it was about as subtle as a hammer, at that time it was considered borderline acceptable. We ran it only on our late-night programs. In 2010, Cher appeared on our *Video Music Awards* wearing precisely the same outfit—and until she told the story nobody even commented on her see-through costume. Based on current standards, it was practically demure!

The only other aspect of the video selection process I tried to influence was the inclusion of as much European music as possible. At every opportunity we emphasized that we were not an American MTV clone, and that we did not intend to import more American culture to Europe. Unfortunately, the majority of high-quality music videos were being produced in the United States and the U.K. by U.S. and British artists. We tried to encourage video production in Europe. If the music was good, even if the video quality was not, we tried to find a way to play it. The one thing we were looking for were videos that had a strong lyrical or musical hook so that even if people didn't understand the words, they could sing or repeat them. In those early years Anglo-American music dominated our playlist. Our viewers demanded mainstream artists like Madonna, Prince, and M.C. Hammer and we gave it to them.

But at every opportunity we supported European artists. We wanted the 16-year-old in Belgrade to hear the most popular bands in Scandinavia. When we were launched in 1989, our objective was to introduce a diversity of music to young Europeans. Initially, at least, it wasn't possible. Those videos didn't exist. To fill that gap, at times we would film local bands or do a special from a city; in 1990, for example, we did a program from Prague called *Forty Bands Banned for Forty Years*. Outside of the U.K. there wasn't a strong music video industry in much of Europe. Our basic guideline was that we wouldn't run a video unless the record was released in a majority of European countries. It was estimated that only about 10 percent of the records produced in Europe were released in more than one or at most two countries, which meant we had a limited number of videos from which to choose. My rule was that if the music was good we would run an average video, but if the music was bad we wouldn't run it even if the video was great.

I knew our video selection process was fair because we received complaints about it from a wide variety of sources. For example, the French government continually complained that we didn't play enough French music. We played as much as we could; for example, we were playing Algerian Khaled's video "Didi" even before it made France's Top 50, we played Mano Negra, but obviously we didn't play enough French music to satisfy them. Germans complained that we didn't play enough German music. We had a large German audience and I

wanted to play German music, but basically there was no German music industry. Because of the long-time American military presence in that country, the German music scene was dominated by American artists. Every radio in Germany played either American or Schlager music, which was essentially pop ballads. We worked very hard to encourage the German music industry, which initially took the form of techno-bands like Kraftwerk pop singers like Falco and the eurodance band Snap! We played as much of it as we could. MTV had the unique capability of introducing music to different cultures and I was very proud of the fact that we successfully brought a diversity of music to the world. We gave European exposure to groups like Sweden's Roxette and the Creeps and Ace of Base, Denmark's Lois Lane, and the electronic band Enigma from Romania. Our Song of the Year in 1994 was "7 Seconds" by Senegalese Youssou N'Dour and Swedish rapper Neneh Cherry. I remember sitting in the largest disco in Seoul, South Korea, listening as German techno blasted through the sound system—and thinking proudly, *we helped make this possible*. When the independent labels complained that we didn't give their artists exposure, we created an entire show, *120 Minutes*, and played two solid hours of independent-label music.

We had the power to create hits, to change lives, and some of the independent record promoters would do just about anything to break an act, to get their video played. We always had to be careful about our selection process and playlist. The long list of scandals that have plagued the music industry dates back at least to the 1950s, when record companies would *pay* popular disc jockeys to play their records. I've seen payola on the fringes of our business; for example, there were Russian music channels that blatantly accepted payment for running videos. I also believe that around the world some of our smaller competitors have accepted a payment for playing videos. It happens. But we've done everything possible to prevent that from happening at our channels. We talked about it; we had strict controls in place; we watched carefully for it. Have we prevented it from happening 100 percent of the time? It's impossible to say that. But, while I wouldn't doubt it has happened, we've never had evidence that someone at one of our channels had accepted something of value in return for adding a video to our playlist. I do know that if it had happened, we would have stopped it instantly.



Our on-air representatives, our wallpaper, our image-makers were our VJs. These were our hosts, the public face of our brand. We wanted to create a strong emotional bond between MTV Europe and our viewers, and we selected our VJs with that in mind. I was asked once how we selected them. I explained very seriously that we conducted a wide search for those people who best reflected the diversity of our viewers, who understood music, and who had a pleasant personality. I went on for a while and finally concluded, “And then we hire the most attractive people we can.”

Contrary to what was generally believed, that wasn't true at all. Our objective in selecting VJs was to find the type of people our viewers would want to hang out with. For that reason, we selected them carefully to *mirror our audience*. Diversity was extremely important in our staff; they came from different countries, they were different nationalities and religions, they liked different types of music, and they had worked in both high-profile and quite normal jobs; we covered as much territory with our VJs as possible. Whoever our viewer was, we wanted him or her to have at least one VJ with whom to identify. I wanted some VJs to be funny, some VJs to be stunning, some VJs to have an encyclopedic knowledge of music—and all of them to be accessible. We found our VJs by advertising for “presenters” in newspapers all over Europe, holding auditions, listening to recommendations, and even looking at the hundreds of unsolicited tapes that arrived at the office. We even held open competitions for VJs and had literally thousands of entrants show up or submit entries. VJs would come to us by all different routes. We relied on the young members of our team to make the judgments because, in essence, they were our audience.

And while we did want nice-looking on-air talent (who wouldn't want attractive people representing their business?) it was more important that our viewers would feel comfortable with them. The German magazine *Stem* accurately described our VJs: “They have to be one thing, a perfect image of their viewers. Young and fashionable and equipped with a dose of self-consciousness which no one is going to break. They've got to be like a suburban beauty, not a ‘Miss World’; a funny clown among friends, not a dream man. They have to move in front of the camera as if they were talking to friends at a party.”

Many people thought that being a VJ on MTV was the best job in the world. That wasn't true; the best job in the world was conducting the talent search for the VJs. In addition to looking good on camera, our VJs were bright, alert, aware, actively involved people, almost always with a good sense of humor. We had our choice of presenters and these were the people who emerged.

Our first major star was 30-year-old Ray Cokes. He was instantly likeable, with a ready-smile and a self-deprecating attitude. He began hosting *Ray's Request*, a call-in show, which featured segments like "The Bingo Wall of Death" and "Clean Our Souls." There was nothing physically magnetic to set him apart, but when his girlfriend left him he told the whole story on the air—and then he started crying. That was probably the most heartfelt thing most of our viewers had ever seen on television, and so many of them could relate to him. They had experienced the pain of breaking up with a girlfriend or boyfriend. Ray was deluged with a flood of letters, many of them from women who wanted to comfort him. Almost instantly it turned him into a cult figure throughout Europe.

Ray hosted our first hit show, *MTV's Most Wanted*. It was a nightly live show from 8 to 10 P.M. and our staff would hang out at the office after work to watch it. It was like a party every night, and it would be very difficult to overestimate what it did to build our corporate spirit. It included live performances, music videos, viewer phone calls, and silly contests, but mostly it was just Ray Cokes wandering around the entire building being brilliantly creative. It was impossible to know what to expect, because Ray ad-libbed the show, not just breaking through the fourth wall, but smashing it into pieces. Ray Cokes created some of the most inspired breakthrough television I've ever seen. I feel certain he is the only male host to wear a bra, for example. His regular cast included the technical staff, in particular, "Rob the Cameraman," who would follow him wherever he went. The camera was Ray's prop; when he asked Rob a question the camera would bob up and down if the answer was yes and move horizontally for no. Ray Cokes made MTV Europe "must-see TV." The show became a huge cult hit and helped unite Europe. Like the kids around the water fountain in my school discussing *Have Gun—Will Travel*, Europe was talking about whatever Ray Cokes did the night before.

Ray Cokes eventually married a girl from the media department. I loved him, but after he became famous he started making all kinds of

demands from his salary to perks. He wasn't quite as difficult as Russell Brand, though. Russell Brand became a VJ in 2000, and predictably, now, he was as outrageous as anyone we ever put on the air. He was fired when he came to work the day after the attack of September 11 dressed as Osama bin Laden.

When I saw him in late 2010 on the Red Carpet at the VMAs in Madrid with his wife, Katy Perry, I reminded him that he had been an MTV VJ; and in return he reminded me that he had been fired! To which I replied, "And that's the best thing that ever happened to you. Or you'd still be working twelve-hour days in our studio."

Our VJs came from all over Europe. When we got distribution in Germany I knew it was imperative that we have a German VJ on the air, so we advertised in a music magazine which was how we found Kristiane Backer, a radio reporter and producer in Hamburg. Kristiane was a VJ for seven years and became very popular. After dating Pakistan's most famous cricket player for two years, she very publicly converted to Islam. Carolyn Lilipaly was Dutch-Indonesian. Marcel Vanthilt was from Belgium. Pip Dann was a New Zealander. Tim Kash was a Brit who eventually became a very successful VJ on American MTV. Eden was an Israeli who has since become a major star in that country. Davina McCall, who presented on Cokes' *MTV's Most Wanted*, eventually became one of the U.K.'s most popular personalities and has been the host of the highly rated *Big Brother* since its inception. Cat Deeley started in the U.K. and became a popular TV host in the United States. Our first Italian was a singer-rapper named Jovanni who on occasion would play his own music and after leaving MTV became a major star, and another Italian VJ, Enrico Silvestrin, has become a major movie star.

Our VJs had a great variety of backgrounds. Ray Cokes had been trained as a cook before becoming a presenter. Steve Blame, who read the pop news, had earned degrees in math and science. Irishman Paul King, who became known for what was described as his "cockatoo haircut," was a rock star, the lead singer of a band that had two albums go gold. Marijne van der Vlugy was a Dutch model and singer. Carolyn Lilipaly had studied law and worked in media and public relations. Italian presenter Camila Raznovich was a ballerina.

In addition to hosting shows in the studio our VJs reported from all over the world. They were on location constantly. I brought them to

launches all over Europe. We tried to broadcast from as many countries as possible; the MTV Europe VJ broadcasting from your city was a big deal. We wanted our viewers to feel like they were part of the home team, which meant broadcasting from places within their experience. We went to the hottest clubs in every major European city; we covered concerts across the continent and music and entertainment news from each nation. During Michael Jackson's second solo tour through Europe, we were given exclusive access and our VJ Sonya Saul reported from the tour on a show we called *Michael Jackson's Dangerous Diaries*—which was sponsored by Pepsi. James Hyman went from a club in Detroit to Iceland, where he recorded a festival at which Bjork performed. As he reported, the entire village spent the winter drunk, because all they could do in the dark and the freezing cold was drink, race around on snowmobiles, and have sex. James also was warned to be wary of the bears and reported that there was a big ax by the public phones just in case a bear wanted to use the phone while someone else was using it.

Initially, we broadcast from a studio we licensed several blocks away from our office on Mandela Street. It was the right space for us when we started because it enabled us to keep our expenses low and accurately reflected our cutting-edge culture. But having the studio blocks away from our office was inconvenient. For example, when the news show needed a photograph of an artist from our files, somebody literally had to run it to the studio. But by 1992, we were firmly established and had outgrown that building. We moved into a beautiful facility bordering Regents Canal in Camden known as the Breakfast Television Centre.

Years earlier, this building had been a brewery, and then a car showroom, but it had been transformed into the headquarters of *TV-am*, which was basically the British version of the *Today Show*. It was a wonderfully modern building that featured several large plastic egg-cups on the roof. *TV-am* had been very successful; among its hosts and stockholders was David Frost, whose office I inherited. But in 1990, during a government review of commercial TV properties, it had lost its broadcasting franchise. Nobody really understood the reasons for that—it was a popular show—but it enabled our CFO Phillip McDaniel to negotiate a terrific deal for us. To close that deal I had a very long dinner one evening with *TV-am*'s managing director, the legendary U.K. TV figure Bruce Gyngell. We negotiated into the early morning hours.

Bruce told me he actually had received a higher offer for the facility from a religious broadcaster, but “I want to sell it to you because you’re MTV.” We purchased the building and all the broadcasting equipment, including three fully equipped studios, for £3.2 million. A couple of years later it was valued at £20 million. To me, moving into this building was a coming of age. It meant we had hit the big time.

We did all of our taping and live broadcasts in that building, so there were always musicians walking around the halls waiting to perform or promote a record, or simply to be interviewed. There was no way of predicting whom you might meet when the elevator doors opened. Bono, Seal, Green Day, Garth Brooks, Prince, or the Foo Fighters might walk out, or it might just as likely be an unknown new punk band. The Spice Girls used to hang out there, waiting for their break. They appeared on one of our afternoon shows but nobody had any interest in them. Of course, this was before they became *the* Spice Girls. They were five attractive young women of questionable talent who sang bubble-gum music and did a lot of jumping up and down—and eventually became the biggest act in Europe.

Working in that building made everyone feel like they were at the epicenter of the entire music world. Our offices were upstairs, but our technical facilities were downstairs in what we referred to affectionately as “the engine room.” I was so proud of our offices that I was constantly giving tours to anyone who came in—even if they didn’t want to go. We kept more than 10,000 music videos in our library. When we wanted to broadcast a video, we would put it in what was called a beta cart and transmit it by wire to east London, where it was uplinked to the Astra satellite. The satellite then sent our signal back down to earth stations (those big receiving dishes) around Europe.

By the time we moved into this building we were firmly established. By the end of our third year we were breaking even. This was way ahead of our business plan, an amazing accomplishment. We’d proved that a pan-European channel could work. We were adding distribution every week. At first I met with our staff each Friday afternoon to tell them how many homes we’d added that week, but we were growing too fast to keep up with those weekly meetings. We had just about doubled our advertising revenue each year and advertisers were approaching us with package requests. We had become an influential part of European culture, so much

so that a popular magazine wrote, “If it hasn’t happened on MTV, forget it.” And we certainly had bonded with our audience. Some of the hundreds of letters and phone calls we received each week were amazing. We would receive requests from someone in a country at war, like Serbia, asking, “I love your show. My house is being bombed but if you could play Bon Jovi for me I’d be happy.” It was surreal. A girl from Budapest wrote touchingly, “You are the only beautiful thing that I have.”

Absolutely anything to do with MTV Europe was incredibly hot. If one of our employees was wearing an MTV-branded baseball cap or T-shirt or carrying an MTV umbrella or a record bag or just about anything with our logo on it, people noticed them and often would initiate a conversation. They just wanted some kind of personal connection with our channel. One of our producers was walking down Camden Street wearing an MTV T-shirt when someone tapped him on the shoulder and said bluntly, “I want that T-shirt.”

The producer was a bit shocked. “I’m sorry,” he responded, “it’s mine.”

It wasn’t a mugging. The person continued, “No, no, I’ll buy it. I’ll give you 20 pounds for it.” When the producer explained that he wasn’t about to walk down the street without a T-shirt the man said, “Okay, I’ll give you *my* T-shirt.” Right on the street they made that deal.

I realized we had made it one Sunday morning late in 1992. I was reading the *Sunday Times of London’s* annual review of “What’s In and What’s Out.” There has always been a strong backlash against anything American in Europe, so what was *out* was “Anything American.” But on the same page, in the opposite column, I saw my dream had come true. What was *in* was “MTV Europe.”

I sat there, sipped my coffee, and smiled.

