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# **Business Sense Arrow Straight: An Examination of Brand Community and Philanthropy Bordering on Social Entrepreneurship as Primary Reasons for the Success of Vans Warped Tour**

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## **Abstract**

Vans Warped Tour (“Warped”) is the largest and longest-running touring music festival in the United States. Held in non-traditional venues such as fairgrounds, parking lots, and fields—and sponsored by shoe manufacturer Vans since the tour’s inception in 1995—it has been known as “Vans Warped Tour” since 1996. This article discusses the interplay of brand communities and philanthropy bordering on social entrepreneurship as underpinnings of the philosophy of Warped’s founder, Kevin Lyman. It identifies both Lyman and those factors as the primary reasons for the longevity and other successes of Warped, both as a music festival and an entrepreneurial venture.

Keywords: entrepreneurship, leadership, brand communities, marketing, music festivals, entertainment, music business

## **Methodology and Research Design**

The methodology and research design for this case study were three-fold. First, the author reviewed more than ten years of Warped and Kevin Lyman-related journalism for the purpose of learning the history, reported successes, and failures of the entity. Second, the author researched scholarly journal discussion of music festivals, brand communities, and entrepreneurship for the purpose of putting in place a framework comprising factors that influence whether music festivals and entrepreneurs succeed or fail. Third, the author reviewed a series of educational videos produced by Lyman and then interviewed Lyman for the purposes of 1) validating and complementing the research of journalistic reporting; and 2) compar-

ing Lyman's statements to the set of factors identified by scholars as influencing whether music festivals and entrepreneurs succeed or fail.



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## Introduction

Warped is the largest and longest-running touring music festival in the United States (Ticketmaster 2015). Held in non-traditional venues such as fairgrounds, parking lots, and fields, it has been known as “Vans Warped Tour” since 1996. Though it began as a showcase for alternative and punk rock music, over time, Warped has evolved to feature diverse genres including hip-hop and ska.

Warped's longevity appears resultant of smaller accomplishments, such as having built an extensive brand community and a long-standing and unwavering commitment to philanthropy bordering on social entrepreneurship. While Warped has not been without the occasional misstep, those are typically quickly learned from and counterbalanced by the entrepreneurial philosophy and skill of Lyman, who, over time, has developed a ten-point list of advice for budding entrepreneurs.

Warped—which counts 2017 as its twenty-second year—shows no signs of slowing. The ultimate measure of success, however, may not be so much in the future of the fest itself, but rather in the future shows, festi-

vals, businesses, and brands that will launch, and have their own separate successes, inspired by Warped.

## History

Kevin Lyman, founder of Warped, started his live events career producing college parties in the 1980s using fraternities as venues and local bands as talent (Patton 2012). Following college, Lyman became a fixture in the Los Angeles club scene, after a time, becoming the stage manager for the short-lived but legendary Long Beach, California punk rock club *Fenders Ballroom*, a job he says he landed because, “I could read tech riders” (Lyman 2015). In 1991, having never previously been on the road, he was asked by Perry Farrell of Jane’s Addiction, whom Lyman knew from those very same L.A. clubs, to stage-manage the first *Lollapalooza* (Lyman 2015).

Lyman ultimately graduated to producing his own events, initially extreme sports events including *Board Aid*, *The Swatch Impact Tour*, and *Vision Skate Escape*, where snowboarding and skateboarding headlined to the backdrop of music (Patton 2012). It was those events that, when thematically turned on their heads to emphasize the music over the extreme sports, ultimately became Warped.

Warped has consistently played between forty to fifty cities and sold around half a million tickets each year since its inception more than twenty years ago (Sculley 2005, 2014; Lyman 2015). The average fan of Warped is 17.7 years of age (Waddell 2011). The traveling entourage that is Warped comprises over eight hundred people (including over one hundred bands) traveling on nearly two hundred vehicles, about forty of which are buses (Waddell 2006, Gasperini 2008).

The impact and importance of Warped have been recognized by the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame and Museum through an exhibit titled “Warped: 12 Years of Music, Mayhem and More.” That exhibit ran for nine months in 2007 and told “the story of America’s longest-running touring festival and its impact on the music world.” After it closed, the exhibit was placed into a time capsule to be opened at a special event in 2031 (Rock & Roll Hall of Fame 2007).

## Brand Community as a Leading Factor in the Success of Warped

As the largest and longest-running touring music festival in the United States, Warped demonstrates success by a variety of measures. One factor that has led to its overall success is its brand community. However, that factor does not stand alone, but rather is supported by unusual sponsor longevity and multi-genre curatorial prowess.

### Brand Community

Brand community is a concept that can be described, in short, as a consumer's sense of belonging to a common group as related to a brand, through which members of the community buy more, remain loyal, and reduce marketing costs through their grassroots evangelism (Fournier and Lee 2009). The concept of brand community aligns with the concept of "relationship marketing," in which commitment, trust, and shared values between brand and consumer play important roles in the establishment of long-lasting patron relationships (Collin-Lachaud and Duyck 2002). As Collin-Lachaud and Duyck observe, where festivals, in particular, are concerned, "Festival organizers would be wise to develop any and every means of creating a bond [with patrons] and increasing the value of their relationships" (68). Brand community has also been described as the loyalty enjoyed by a business when customers actually feel more "like a family" than like customers (Gainer 1999, 84-85). Gainer, in her profile of baroque orchestra Tafelmusik, lists "community building" as the first on a list of important factors to that organization's success (87).

Warped is the beneficiary of an extensive brand community; this is a major differentiator of Warped from many other festivals. The brand community facet of the festival fits Paul Sweetman's (2004) observation that the most important aspect of a group that exhibits common loyalty (to him, a "neo-tribal society") is not an abstract, idealized goal, but rather feelings of togetherness engendered by direct involvement in the group (Sweetman 2004, 85). On Warped, the emphasis on atmosphere and positive vibes isn't only for the fans, but also for the performers, sponsors, and crew (Waddell 2006). Expanding the "positive vibes" feeling beyond the consumers to those who supply the product itself has, in the case of Warped, served to take the brand community to its extreme. Says the director of one venue at which Warped has played, "The event's a lifestyle

event, it's not just a music concert. It's important as a cultural festival" (Beasley 2012, para. 3).

Another key aspect contributing to Warped's brand community is affordable ticket prices. Ascertaining what constitutes "affordable" in the context of the value proposition offered is a decision made by Warped considering many variables. While one historic, scholarly view of pricing is that live and performing arts products are relatively insensitive to price (Colbert, Beauregard and Vallée 1998), a different view was put forth by Philippe Ravanas who observed in his analysis of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra that, "Matching price and value has always been difficult, particularly for arts organizations" (Ravanas 2008, 71). Nonetheless, it is generally accepted that price elasticity decreases as the perceived quality of the arts' product rises (Colbert, Beauregard, and Vallée 1998). Colbert (2003) added that consumers often view price itself as an indicator of quality (36).

A general admission ticket to Warped (an all general admission tour) costs around US\$40. This price range has remained steady over a period of many years. Says Lyman, "It's [usually] about \$42 for a nine-hour festival, so it's very affordable" (Greenberg 2014, para. 7). The components of brand community and affordable price have engendered an extremely loyal (and apparently self-replenishing) fan base that keeps Warped consistent and successful year after year.

### Sponsor Longevity

Warped's brand community has also led to an extraordinary track record with sponsors. Joanne Cummings (2008) argues that the success of a festival sponsor depends on whether it is able to add to the "experience enhancement" of the festival scene in which it is participating. Warped helps its sponsor brands to meet this goal by working with each to formulate a unique way of participating in the festival and connecting with the Warped audience ("Vans Warped Tour Brings..." 2014). For example, music-industry manufacturing firm Ernie Ball hosted a tent full of carnival style games, and Band Happy offered live music lessons from tour performers (Beasley 2012). This innovative approach to sponsorships and the success it generates seems to be one reason why so many sponsors repeat for multiple years. Take auto manufacturer Kia for example, which joined the tour in 2008 and remained a sponsor through 2014 (*Billboard* staff 2012). Kia took to handing out coupons fans could use for automobile purchases.

In the first year, it was able to directly attribute to those coupons sales of more than eighty vehicles (Tso 2014).

As Bordeaux, De Coster, and Paradis describe in their analysis of music festivals, “Organizers of a cultural enterprise must offer an intangible, hedonistic experience...that includes not only the basic service but peripheral services as well (Eiglier and Langeard 1987). The basic service is the principal reason for attending. In the case of a music festival, it is the content of the event—the live shows. Peripheral services are those surrounding the event” (Bordeaux, De Coster, and Paradis 2001, 40-41). By incorporating unique sponsorship activities into the day’s events, Warped has implemented a double-win strategy that makes both sponsors *and* fans happy.

It can be said that Dowd, Liddle, and Nelson (2004) criticized Warped, contending that having a single, primary sponsor for the festival (shoe manufacturer Vans) intensified tensions within, and threatened the core values of, the skateboarding scene that Warped targets as its core audience. However, that critique minimizes that there is, in fact, a multitude of sponsors (both for-profit and not-for-profit) readily identified with Warped—according to them, “twenty to thirty”—when they wrote their article. Moreover, in 2015 there were sixty-eight such sponsors, three of which (including Vans) were “featured sponsors” (2015 featured sponsors). Indeed, Lyman says that Warped isn’t only about launching tomorrow’s hottest bands but also about creating long-term connections that help associate all of the festival’s sponsors, bands, and not-for-profits with a very positive experience (“Vans Warped Tour Brings...” 2014). “It’s our goal to leave a lasting impression in each city we visit and affect... lives...in many positive ways,” says Lyman (Tso 2014). Vans’ Vice President of Events and Promotions, Steve Van Doren, adds that, “It’s a great way to connect with...consumers...alongside the music they love” (“Vans Warped Tour Brings...” 2014, para. 5).

Warped not only strives to keep existing sponsors happy and returning year after year but also makes a strong and concerted effort to reach out to new brands (*Billboard* staff 2012). Its pitch? Not bland, blah, rote spreadsheets showing return on investment figures but rather an impassioned explanation of the long-term effects that come from an association with Warped. Says Lyman, “I don’t have ROIs on this tour...you can’t put a brand on Warped Tour and then...look the next day and see if there’s a

spike in sales...It's a build, it's a 'cred' factor" (*Billboard* staff, 2012 para. 6). This perspective fits with the brand-community concept.

Indeed, Vans itself has matured from an \$88 million per year brand into a nearly \$2 billion per year brand since its affiliation with Warped began ("Vans, Inc. History" n.d.; "VF Corporation 2013 Annual Report" 2014). While it is impossible to quantify the amount of that growth directly attributable to Warped, the immensely positive effect that Warped has had on the Vans brand (and, consequently, on its revenues) would be hard to deny.

### Curatorial Prowess

As mentioned above, Warped has moved beyond punk and evolved to include, and even sometimes feature, other musical genres. Despite that diversity, Warped maintains consistent fan demographics and attendance numbers year after year. It does this primarily through a strategy of locking in a key core of bands (the exact number in Lyman's book is seventeen). This strategy maintains Warped's credibility and brings in seventy percent of Warped's core fans. Warped then diversifies the genres for the other sixty-five or so bands, both to broaden the core fans' horizons *and* bring in the other thirty percent of the fans needed to sell consistent numbers (Lyman, interview April 17, 2015). While Lyman's adoption of the aforementioned strategy was instinctive, it closely mirrors the "balanced portfolio" strategy described by Gainer in her profile of Canada's baroque orchestra, Tafelmusik (Gainer 1999, 83-84). As Gainer described, a live and performing arts venture adopting a strategy like Lyman's "is able to cross-subsidize its activities in the short term in order to ensure long-term...stability" (84). The description offered by Gainer was echoed by Collin-Lachaud and Duyck in their analysis of marketing management focused on the Francofolies of La Rochelle (Collin-Lachaud and Duyck 2002, 67-68).

Brindisi, Sinkovich, and Ravanas (2013) contend that the most important facet for some entertainment brands is credibility. By this measure, where programming is concerned, Warped scores highly. Its well-established "lock in the core bands" strategy has accustomed its core fans to expecting a consistent lineup of at least *some* talent they will want to see.

Fournier and Lee (2009) contend that 1) brand communities fostering strong sales cycles are strongest when all members have roles in the community, and 2) conversely, many companies mismanage their brand

communities by, for example, tightly controlling them. Warped scores points by this measure as well, since curating its primary product—the talent that performs on the Warped stages—isn't a dictatorial affair. Rather, while all final talent buying decisions sit clearly and squarely with Lyman, a tremendous amount of input is sought from a variety of sources both inside and outside the organization. For example, the process of lining up one tour's artist roster included the fans. They were surveyed to provide feedback on artists from a recently concluded Warped tour. This information was used in developing the next lineup (Waddell 2011). In doing so, Lyman incorporated a tactic that Bordeau, De Coster, and Paradis identified as one of the two primary methodologies for determining customer satisfaction (i.e., asking customers to evaluate a product or service after the consumption experience) (2001, 43). This style of seeking input while retaining the final decision-making authority is reminiscent of another arts programmer, Zarin Mehta, a veteran of the Montreal Symphony Orchestra, Ravinia Festival, and New York Philharmonic (Cardinal and Lapierre 1999).

Further to the point, Warped's curated artist portfolio isn't a mere collection designed to take up "X" number of "Y"-minute time slots. Instead, Warped takes care to promote and further the careers of the artists who perform on its stages. In 2011, the tour implemented a strategy of releasing the names of five artists each week during the on-sale period so fans would spend time learning about *all* of the acts that would play, rather than only the headliners (Maloy 2011). That's brand community for, and among, bands (i.e., the product).

As for Lyman's leadership role in the talent selection, he is able to sense which diverse acts might resonate with Warped's fans, despite his background in, and solid love for, the punk genre. He points out that Warped has always featured more than punk. "Even the first year, we had a sprinkling of ska, surf/reggae, hard core, and indie" (Lyman, interview April 17, 2015). Beyond that, he attributes his curatorial ability to his exposure to many kinds of music early in his career when he just wanted to work and earn, and therefore took whatever shows were available—whether they were punk or "Iranian music on Thanksgiving, [jobs I got] because no one else would work on Thanksgiving" (Lyman, interview April 17, 2015).

Warped's programming credibility, skill, and success are also evidenced by the fact that it has helped launch the careers of several notable

artists, some of whom might seem surprising given Warped's reputation as a "punk" festival. Perhaps the most unlikely is Katy Perry, who was booked by Lyman to appear in the 2008 version of Warped based on the strength of a single song he had heard, before her first major-label record was even recorded, let alone released. Lyman is clearly, but modestly, proud of having had a hand in the career launch of Perry, now a top-tier artist. "When this is all over, I'm gonna be really proud of hearing one song of Katy...and I went 'I want her on Warped tour'...she came out there and learned how to be a live performer. I'm gonna be very proud that I was part of that start for her in some small way" (Baltin 2012, para. 6).

The inclusive approach of Warped toward its fans, and the far-reaching platform that it offers, contribute to its popularity as a brand community for artists. More than one thousand bands formally submit for participation each year, and countless others use more informal methods, such as pestering Lyman on site to try and get a coveted stage slot (Waddell 2006). Lyman's philosophy of using the platform to expose developing bands and brands to a large audience, showcasing eighty bands each day, at a fair price, around the country, to over half a million fans each year, is a big reason why there are always far more acts interested in playing the fest than there are time slots to fill (Sculley 2005; Tso 2014).

### **But, Success is Usually Accompanied by Some Failure**

Typically, success does not come without some failure, and Lyman and his festival are not immune from this phenomenon. "We still have failures," said Lyman, in one published interview (Cooper 2008, para. 13).

One misstep for Warped that Lyman notes is a return visit to Australia in 2014. Lyman thought this was a good idea because the inaugural visit the previous year had not only been commercially successful, it had also been another industry first (and a lot of fun) because the entire tour camped across the continent for all its dates. But, says Lyman, "The [Australian] market was saturated with festivals, and we went in with an older punk lineup than we had in the U.S., so cross-marketing was hard" (Lyman, interview April 17, 2015).

Another self-acknowledged stumble for Warped was the attempt to expand its domestic footprint to include a fourth Florida stop in as many days in 2015 (the stop was Ft. Lauderdale; St. Petersburg, West Palm Beach, and Orlando were the other three). Tickets for the fourth stop didn't sell well, and the lessons learned from that mistake were 1) four shows

in Florida is, for Warped, “just too much,” and 2) scheduling festivals during Independence Day week can be perilous (Lyman, interview April 17, 2015). Despite the occasional blooper, the Warped organization has a practiced philosophy of learning from its mistakes and adapting accordingly. This has helped ensure the continuity and well-being of the festival.

## Behind the Curtain: Kevin Lyman

Kevin Lyman’s explanation for the success of Warped and its related ventures is outlined in ten bullet points of advice he offers to young entrepreneurs. While the five most pivotal of those ten are discussed here, it is the last—philanthropy bordering on social entrepreneurship—that is perhaps the most important.



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## Living and Dying with Your Decisions

A linchpin of Lyman’s entrepreneurial style is a commitment to make decisions and stand by them. One example of this is Lyman’s decision a few years back to offer parents free admission to the festival grounds and a “Parent Day Care” center. Industry pundits and confidants alike might have suggested that a large number of free tickets was bad business, but Lyman stayed his course, predicting that this tweak would not only make parents comfortable about where their children were spending the day, but also *increase* revenue. One could see this as adding parents to a brand community that already included fans and artists. Lyman was right, and the parents joined the community.

Another example of a positive and successful tweak implemented despite resistance stemmed from a survey, the results of which showed that the number one criticism of Warped by its attending fans was high prices for food and beverages (Waddell 2011). In response, Lyman struggled with promoters and venues to lower the cost of bottled water from \$4.50 to \$3.00. The tour also introduced a prepaid food package, sold with tickets, that included a cheeseburger, fries, and soda for an extra \$8.50 (Waddell 2011). The ticket/food package assured parents that their kids

would be fed. It also served to reduce the incidence of kids seeking additional parent-provided food money (Beasley 2012). Initial opposition from industry players, who preferred the status quo, ultimately gave way to admiring recognition and then the adoption of the tactic by other promoters, shows, and fests.

Lyman not only lives, but also sometimes dies, by the decisions he makes. Perhaps a historical overview of the timeline of Lyman-related events tells this story the best. Lyman's earliest events featured extreme sports at the forefront with music only as a backdrop, or even an afterthought (Patton 2012). Clearly, the emphasis was something Lyman had started to die by, as it turned out actually to be counter to the ultimate emphasis that led to Warped's long-term success (i.e., featuring the music under the patina of extreme sports).

Most decisions about Warped are made by Lyman, and the buck stops with him. "I have great people with me, but ultimately, the decision is mine. I make wrong decisions. But I make 'em. I think we're paralyzed, our whole world, if you look at it from the top down. You look at Congress. They don't make decisions! They talk...too long. Make the decision and move...right or wrong. I'll make decisions every day and live up to those decisions" (*Billboard* staff 2012, para. 10).

## Going with Your Gut

One unique characteristic of Warped, and its founder Kevin Lyman, is a willingness to trust instinct as much as (and often more than) empirical data and quantifiable business strategy. The Parent Day Care, the prepaid food package, and the affordable bottled water—each of which had critics prior to implementation—are all examples of Lyman's "gut" that he trusted, and which led to a successful end. Indeed, according to Lyman, a good gut is essential. "If this was purely driven by economics, there would be a lot of Warped...but if I laid it all out for you economically, no one could figure out how it works...because it's not really always based on finances" (Waddell 2006, 24). This is not to say that no decisions about Warped are based on economics—some clearly are. For example, Warped does its own catering as opposed to using the venue-offered options, because, "if you based it on a normal deal when you go into an arena...most people couldn't handle [the economic consequences]" (Waddell 2006, 24).

## Learning from Your Failures

Another Lyman cornerstone, though certainly not one unique to him among entrepreneurs, is learning from failure.

When asked about this, Lyman mentions his recent involvement in the *Great American Nightmare* haunted house franchise, which is linked to musician Rob Zombie (Lyman 2015). Always eager to try new things, and anticipating great financial success, Lyman was initially excited about the project. In the end, the version of the haunt that included Lyman failed because, “We tried to do too much by mashing up concerts with the haunted house, and the fans wanted either one or the other; very few people came for both” (Lyman, interview April 17, 2015). True to form, Lyman took from this failure some lessons he could use on other projects: 1) don’t do something just for the money, and 2) know your audience (who, in this case, were young millennials “living in a Groupon culture” and “wanting ‘boo-scared,’ not ‘disturbed scared’”) (Lyman, interview April 17, 2015).

An earlier failure was his Country Throwdown Tour. The tour was conceptualized by Lyman, who was early to recognize—nearly ten years before the established country music industry—that the internet would someday launch country artists more powerfully than radio and CD sales (just as it had been doing for artists of other genres for some time) (Lyman, interview April 17, 2015). Despite the fact that Country Throwdown can claim a role in the early success of some, now, top-tier artists (e.g., Florida Georgia Line), it ultimately didn’t work well and was shuttered. Again, though, Lyman learned from his failure. The lessons this time? First, know your partners (and Lyman says those in the country business at the time were resistant to the change he foresaw and which now has, in fact, taken place in that genre). Second, “know when they don’t want you there” (Lyman says the Nashville crowd—at least at that time—didn’t want outsiders in either their world or their business).

## Being Confident, not Cocky

Many people believe confidence is a prerequisite to business success, and Lyman includes this characteristic on his list as well. Lyman, though, is careful to distinguish between confident and cocky. He says that the “cockiness” of the Nashville folks with whom he dealt on the Country Throwdown Tour is one of the reasons that the tour ultimately did not succeed (Lyman, interview April 17, 2015).

It may be that Kevin Lyman's confidence (not cockiness) was the first spark that ignited the Warped fire back in 1995. Lyman had the idea for a punk and extreme-lifestyle festival using bands he knew from the Los Angeles club scene when, coincidentally, he was called for a meeting with Walter Schoenfeld who was then CEO of Vans, Inc. From Schoenfeld's perspective, the meeting's purpose was to interview Lyman for the job of running a one-time skate-fest under the Vans name. Lyman confidently treated the meeting as an opportunity to pitch his newly-hatched idea for a music-centered fest...and Warped was not only born, but also had its first sponsor (Lyman 2015). Lyman recognizes that confidence is necessary to, as they say, "win friends and influence people." However, despite his success, he steers clear of allowing confident to balloon into cocky.

### Remembering Philanthropy

Muñiz and O'Guinn (2001) point out that the "brand community" concept manifests itself in shared consciousness, ritual, tradition, and a sense of moral responsibility. On this front, and notwithstanding the other factors in Lyman's stew of success, perhaps the one that has been the most influential, and almost certainly the one that sets him the most apart from other successful entertainment industry entrepreneurs, is remembering philanthropy. This Lyman does to the point of using the festival as a vehicle to impact society's most pressing social problems. From the very first year of Warped, when it was not yet even profitable, the tour has donated twenty-five cents of the price of each paid ticket to Unite the United, a charitable foundation founded by Lyman. The mission of the foundation is to encourage work toward positive change by supporting local charities and participating in community volunteerism (Lyman 2015; Lyman, interview April 17, 2015; "Unite the United" 2015).

Lyman attributes his philanthropic core to his upbringing in Claremont, California, a college town he says is sometimes referred to as "Berkeley South" due to its similar philosophical, political, and activist leanings (Lyman, interview April 17, 2015). Says Lyman, "Maybe I didn't fully understand it back then, but it was like all that grass roots activity [that I saw and participated in during my youth] made me think, 'how do you make change every day in your life?'" (Lyman, interview April 17, 2015). Indeed, when Lyman was asked in a 2013 interview to identify the defining moments of his career, two of his three choices were related to philanthropic accomplishments: 1) receiving the 2009 *Billboard* Touring

Awards Humanitarian of the Year Award, and 2) being named the 2011 MusiCares MAP Fund honoree (Haftel 2012).

Not only has Lyman become inextricably immersed in philanthropy as a part of his life and business model, he has also dedicated a large share of his entrepreneurial efforts to aiding in the success of the fifteen to twenty not-for-profits he invites to participate on-site in Warped each year (“Participating Non-Profit Organizations” 2015). For example, MusiCares has received more than \$400,000 in donations since beginning its partnership with Warped, and the Music Saves Lives Tour Blood Drive draws nearly half a million pints of blood from Warped fans annually. Some of the other not-for-profit endeavors that have taken up a summer home on Warped include Action for Animals, Keep a Breast Foundation, and Art Feeds. In 2012, music met anti-smoking when the “truth truck” rolled onto the event grounds (“Vans Warped Tour Brings...” 2014).

One might think that adding not-for-profits to the tour is only a feel-good measure with a low probability of producing results. After all, why would young, music-focused fans take time out of an already busy day of festival experiences to learn about new philanthropic causes? To buttress fans’ attention to the not-for-profits, Warped introduced a “passport” system through which fans collect stamps from the participating organizations and, after filling their passports, enter to win a variety of prizes (“Vans Warped Tour Brings...” 2014).

Lyman says he is quite proud of the fact that people whose lives are touched by Warped seem to come away from it with raised awareness. For example, the first year of the Alternative Press Music Awards included an Artist Philanthropic Award, and the nominees “were all bands that broke out on the Warped Tour” (Lyman, interview April 17, 2015). That a “philanthropy-first” mentality is a cornerstone of commercial success is perhaps the biggest differentiator of Lyman from other successful entertainment industry entrepreneurs. Warped is a for-profit venture, no doubt. However, its focus on philanthropy is so strong that one might credibly argue its primary mission is perhaps one of social entrepreneurship.

## A View of the Future

Lyman says it is unlikely he will either sell Warped or turn over its operation to a national promoter or producer (Lyman, interview April 17, 2015; Waddell 2006). He loves the fest dearly and still very much enjoys

traveling to every date along with it. “I realized that this is what I do really well... [and anyway,] I find that I’m terminally unemployable [elsewhere],” he says (Waddell 2006, 25). While the veracity of the first part of this quote is as undoubtedly true as is the falsity of the second, it’s clear that Warped isn’t on the market, at least not currently. This is because Lyman believes Warped will probably die with him (or by him) because it can’t be run in the same way as other festivals, “because ninety percent of the things [it does] are not financially driven, [and] it’s kind of an unmanageable project” (Lyman, interview April 17, 2015).

Lyman is also modest about his ability to keep the festival—already the longest continuously-running, traveling festival anywhere near its size—going indefinitely. He states, without anxiety, that “Warped Tour could go out of business this year if my instincts [in selecting talent] are wrong, or kids just don’t want to hang out anymore.” He is also constantly aware of all the “behind-the-scenes battles [like with Ticketmaster] that I have to fight, trying to keep this thing going” (Lyman, interview April 17, 2015). Rather than selling the Warped festival or brand, Lyman seems content to let it run its course and then, ultimately, die with or by him. His real hope for the future appears to lie more in seeing fruit borne of the brand community and philanthropic inspiration that he and Warped provide for the fans, the bands, and the brands. “I don’t know about the future of Warped, but there are a lot of kids out there that I think could be inspired maybe to start a new type of Warped Tour” (Lyman, interview April 17, 2015).

As for Lyman himself, his “try something new” philosophy is pivotal to the future. “You stay in the game longer if you have some distractions and things that allow you to use your knowledge for something new” (Lyman, interview April 17, 2015). In short, one could guess it will be a long while before exhausting the list of places one might see Kevin Lyman pop up next.

## Implications for Management

This case study of Vans Warped Tour and its founder Kevin Lyman reinforces lessons often learned elsewhere but just as often forgotten. Among those lessons are that:

Success is likely fostered by:

- building a brand community around one's product, success in which causes consumers to buy more and remain loyal, thereby reducing marketing costs
- formulating unique ways for sponsors to participate and connect with the consuming audience, success in which leads to sponsor longevity
- embracing commonly accepted entrepreneurial characteristics, such as being decisive, going with one's "gut," learning from one's failures, and being confident
- embracing unique entrepreneurial characteristics that can build consumers' passion for the product, such as a philanthropic mindset

Success is likely hindered by:

- entering a saturated market
- building a product line that doesn't lend itself to cross-marketing
- (particularly where music festivals are concerned), scheduling head-to-head with formidable competition (which may be something other than a competing product, such as Independence Day in the United States)

Managers are well advised to regularly revisit the basics of what does, and does not, make for success.

## Conclusion

Vans Warped Tour's success can be emulated by businesses of many types, especially festivals and those that are otherwise related to music and/or millennials. Its longevity and other successes arise out of a mosaic of smaller triumphs, chief among them brand community and philanthropy bordering on social entrepreneurship. While Warped has experienced the occasional misstep, Lyman, guided by his entrepreneurial philosophy and skill, has learned from those failures. Warped shows no signs of slowing. As it continues to grow, it also demonstrates an increasing influence on festival practices. It will be interesting to watch other shows, festivals, businesses, and brands adopt and adapt Warped's and Lyman's approaches in pursuit of their own success.

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