



Tickets are going to be the busiest year to date for advanced ticket sales

presence really makes a difference."

With 5m page impressions a month and 750,000 opted-in registered users, Emap's Aloud.com is one of the dominant forces in the "front-end" of the online ticketing business. It won best design of a consumer site at the Association of Online Publishers Awards in 2003 and best online property from a media owner at Revolution's awards in 2004. Its main competitor is IPC's nme.com.

As head of co-promotions and ticketing at Emap Performance, Gigi Dryer believes the sector has not yet reached its full potential. "The market is showing high growth and high profit," says Dryer. "Music fans have shown they have an incredible passion for good, high-quality content with a personality. To satisfy that demand we send out 100,000 full colour newsletters and 650,000 e-mail gig alerts."

While Emap concentrates on providing content for the site, Dryer says it is partnerships with "back-end" companies that are driving the sector forward. "At Aloud, we deal directly with promoters," says Dryer, "They are our customers. We deal with all the major promoters, Clear Channel, SJM, 3A, Metropolis, DF Concerts in Scotland and dozens of others.

"It is our role to drive traffic through the site and we leave the 'back-end' side to our partners."

But, as well as creating a burgeoning market, the online ticket industry has also created its fair share of controversy. Besides Bob Geldof's successful campaign to block eBay selling tickets for Live 8, an OFT report announced a radical shake-up in the way tickets were sold, indicating that public were not getting clear information on prices.

Dryer, however, maintains that booking fees and service charges on online tickets are legitimate expenses. "Whenever anyone logs on to Aloud.com to buy a ticket there is a whole process that has to be gone through before the customer receives the ticket," she explains. "Usually the face value of the ticket price is split between the artist, venue and promoter and there is usually a 10% to 15% booking fee added to the face value of the ticket price. From this, the credit card company takes a percentage, See takes a percentage and we take a percentage.

"Added to this, there is a delivery charge which is needed to cover the cost of sending out the tickets by recorded delivery. It all adds up."

While Aloud.com concentrates on drawing users to the site, it is up to its partner, See Tickets, to provide what Dryer calls the "back end" support. See Tickets is the combined ticketing operation of Really Useful Theatres and what was formerly known as Way Ahead. It currently sells more than 8m tickets a year across the music, exhibition, theatre and sport categories and has offices in London and Nottingham. It says 112,500 tickets for this year's Glastonbury were sold through the company.

It provides branded online ticketing services for SJM and Metropolis, 3A, Bookings Direct, Marshall Arts and Mean Fiddler, and supplies tickets for Wembley Arena and Earls Court, as well as back-end support to its partners

MW examines the ticketing sector and highlights how online sales and new formats look set to raise the bar even higher

Ticketing boom clicks into place

It is certainly a far cry from the days of standing outside a venue in the pouring rain waiting to buy a ticket with a soggy fiver in your pocket.

The buoyancy of the current live music business is an accepted fact – and the simple process of selling tickets is playing a significant part of that.

According to latest figures from the Office of Fair Trading, 2003 saw the total value of advance ticket sales in the UK at around £1.4bn.

This boom has created a significant market where the main players in the industry – such as Clear Channel, Emap, IPC, Ticketmaster and See Tickets – are willing to invest millions of pounds in content, technology and security in their battle to persuade every potential customer to buy tickets from them. In turn, venues and promoters are more aware than ever of the benefits of selling tickets online.

The online ticket business is an area which Melvin Benn, Mean Fiddler's managing director for festivals, is watching with interest.

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Gigi Dryer, Emap

"The beauty of online ticketing is that it is accessible to nearly everyone," says Benn. "If people are at their work and they want to buy a ticket, it is much easier to do it online than to do it over the telephone where someone could be aware they are on the phone a lot.

"There has been a change in British society towards live music and online ticketing is definitely a part of that change."

All seven Mean Fiddler venues in London use online ticket agency See Tickets, as well as the company's own online ticketing system. The venues switched from rival Ticketmaster at the beginning of 2005.

"We still have tickets for all our venues available from the Astoria, where people can buy them at face value and that is something we will definitely keep," says Benn. "Where online ticketing really helps is for shows of 1,000, where 990 of those tickets are guaranteed to be sold. It is those last 10 that are the hardest to sell and where an online

Aloud.com, NME.com and lastminute.com.

On the other side of the divide, a partnership between Clear Channel and Ticketmaster is proving lucrative for all involved. Clear Channel's site, getLIVE.co.uk, covers live events across virtually every genre from metal to jazz. The service started out as www.cclive.co.uk, Clear Channel's first consumer-facing portal on the web in the UK, providing the company with the opportunity to promote events and sell tickets online linking to Ticketmaster.

Clear Channel's Mark Yovich, director of new media Europe (music), believes the opportunities for online ticket agencies are "limitless".

"Our site now sells tickets to all UK events in the UK, not just Clear Channel's as was previously the case with www.cclive.co.uk," says Yovich. "Out-sourcing ticketing operations leaves us free to look after marketing of our events. Up to 40% of our customers now buy their tickets online."

For every customer who logs on to getLIVE and buys a ticket, it is the responsibility of staff at Ticketmaster's centres in London, Manchester and Glasgow to ensure the customer's credit card details are processed correctly and the ticket is sent out on time.

Launched in the UK in 1981, Ticketmaster - which acquired internet-based box office ticketing software and services company TicketWeb in 1998 - says it has sold 10m tickets through its distribution network in 2004.

It is currently pioneering security system AccessManager and is also planning on introducing a new product which will provide extensive customer management and marketing tools and extensive reporting capabilities.

As well as the main online ticket agencies, other sites attract plenty of potential customers. One of the most popular is eFestivals, which was launched at Glastonbury in 1998; starting as a single webpage when it announced the first confirmed listing, an under-two's toy tent in the Kidz Field, it now accounts for ticket sales worth £6m a year.

"We deal with all the main online ticket agents," says eFestivals founder Neil Greenway. "Fans come on to the site to see what the line-up is for festivals and there are easy links for them to buy tickets. This way, tickets are just a click away from news about the festival."

Cutting out the amount of time spent on ensuring tickets are available where they should be is a valuable asset for promoters such as Neil Pengelly, promoter of Carling: Reading and Leeds Weekend. He believes the rise in online ticketing is a result of people becoming more comfortable using the internet.

"The whole use of the internet as a promotional tool probably does help us sell more tickets," says Pengelly. "For example, a lot of bands now have direct ticket links from their site to ours, so for some gigs it becomes a lot easier to reach the right people and let them know the show is on which is the most important part of promoting at the end of the day."

Speeding up transaction times is something V festival director Bob Angus believes benefits everyone. "By making tickets available online, events become more accessible to people, which is great for sales, which, in turn, is good news for bands and promoters," says Angus. "The transaction time is speeded up greatly online and is

Mobi-ticket set to boost business

Such is the advance in mobile phone technology, that personal barcodes with ID-user photographs sent to mobile phones via text messages could soon replace paper tickets at gigs.

Edinburgh-based company Mobiga has pioneered new technology which can send barcodes and ID photographs to those customers who have bought tickets via websites.

Chief executive of the company, Iain McCready outlines a cunningly simple process. "At present we have a system called the mobi-ticket that can send a text message to anyone who has bought a ticket from a website, be it from a venue or an online ticket agency," he says. "Within the text message is a unique barcode relating to the ticket that has been sold. All the customer has to do is turn up at the

venue with their mobile phone and some ID. At the venue a scanner is then used to ensure the ticket is valid."

As well as the mobi-ticket, the company has recently launched the mobi-pass system, which allows the customer to upload a photograph which is incorporated into the barcode. This is redeemed at the venue by scanning the barcode on the phone display with a standard scanner and cross-checking the ID of the bearer.

When the mobi-pass barcode is scanned, the customer's photo is retrieved from the ticket database so that ID can be verified. Mobi-pass can't be transferred like a paper ticket because the photo links the ticket directly to the customer. It recently won the best mobile messaging innovation award at the 2005 Global Messaging Awards in London last month.

The mobi-ticket is already being used in 22 different countries around the world, including the SECC in Glasgow, where the add-on price to the face-value of tickets is £1.20.

McCready adds, "As well as combating touting and



forgeries, venues can track attendance in real-time for health, safety, and audit purposes.

"The multimedia version even enables colour images, branding and artist's video to accompany the barcode and ticket copy text for those mobile phones that support it."

New-look ticketing: how the "mobi-ticket" might appear

instantaneous for both the customer and the outlet, as opposed to telephone bookings taking an operator approximately five to 10 minutes per transaction."

Selling tickets online is becoming normal business practice for venues, as it allows them to tap into the customer database the agencies hold.

Steve Forster is group operations director for Academy Music Group, which owns Academy venues around the country, including Brixton Academy and Shepherd's Bush Empire. He estimates 70% of tickets sold for AMG venues are through the internet.

"The majority of shows at AMG's larger venues, such as Brixton Academy, are promoted through external promoters and the venue will usually retain 40% of tickets to sell on behalf of the promoter per event," says Forster. "There are three main ways in which we do this, which are cash sales to personal callers to venue box offices, then via online and tele-sales with our ticketing agency, Ticketweb.

"These three ways for customers to purchase tickets gives customers choice and flexibility. Promoters will allocate the further 60% to other ticket outlets, for example with Brixton shows, these are often agencies such as See Tickets, Ticketmaster and Stargreen."

Earls Court also uses See Tickets, and Suzie Pollock, entertainment manager at the venue, believes there are major benefits to linking up with an online ticket agency.

"Our relationship with See Tickets allows us to benefit from their professional and reliable service, which makes purchasing tickets quick and

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festivals

efficient," says Pollock. "It also allows us to benefit from See's extensive database of subscribers, their technical expertise and their impressive technical infrastructure."

At King Tut's Wah Wah Hut in Glasgow, staff have been quick to pick up on the online revolution. DF Concerts promoter and booker at the venue, Dave McGeachan, says if a customer comes in to buy a ticket and all paper tickets have already been sold, they can use a Ticketmaster machine installed near the bar. When buying a ticket from this machine, no additional booking fees are added.

"As well as the venue and Ticketmaster machine, we also sell tickets through Ticketmaster.co.uk, GigsinScotland.com and the TicketScotland shop in Glasgow," explains McGeachan.

"If people are at school, college or work and want to buy a ticket, then having so many different ways of buying them can only be a good thing."

As for where the online revolution goes next, Jonathan Brown, secretary of the Society of Ticket Agents and Retailers, is convinced the only way forward is for advances in security technology and legislation to ban touts.

"The sporting industry is lobbying the Government for legislation to crack down on touts and this is something we intend to fully support for the entertainment industry," says Brown. "There is no guarantee we will be able to change anything, but putting pressure on the Government is one way forward."

If one thing is assured in the live sector, however, the days of fans queuing up for tickets outside venues are certainly long gone.