AUDIO AI IN BRAND COMMUNICATION – IT'S ALL ABOUT THE STRATEGY

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Amidst the fervor surrounding artificial intelligence, brand managers face the critical task of making the right choices for their brand's essence. A multitude of audio AI tools pledge to elevate the acoustic brand experience to unprecedented heights. Yet, which tools deliver tangible added value? Lars Ohlendorf, Head of Design at WESOUND, elucidates in his guest article why audio branding and audio marketing derive benefits not so much from the AI tools themselves, but rather from a strategic realignment.

AUDIO AI IN COMMUNICATION AND ADVERTISING

In the realm of commercial enterprise, the advent of artificial intelligence in the auditory domain is unlocking a spectrum of multifaceted applications and perspectives, as well as a suite of challenges. There is a certain charm in witnessing the plethora of innovations currently being tested and developed in nascent projects. Moreover, the public debates offer a delightful spectrum, ranging from grim predictions of widespread unemployment to exuberant assertions that this represents the most significant growth sector since the advent of the internet. The industry is indeed vibrant and evolving at a breakneck pace.

However, it appears to me that practical examples of audio AI implementation are somewhat scarce in discussions. For instance, what is the benefit of a synthesized voice if it fails to meet the broadcast quality standards for television or radio, mediums that continue to be relevant? Or the utility of a music analysis tool that, based on its data, simulates the assessment of a demographic which is entirely inconsequential for a particular brand?

Especially when there is a weekly influx of new products and services associated with audio AI flooding the market, it behooves us to momentarily shift our focus from the tools to the purpose of their application, and thereby to a potential strategy. It is only through a fusion of realistic expectations, technical acumen, and creative strategies that we can construct bridges from conception to practical application, thereby unlocking novel communication avenues and experiential domains for brands.

THE PROMISE: TO ANALYZE AND GENERATE SOUNDS WITH A MYRIAD OF AUDIO AI SOLUTIONS.

Audio AI unfolds along two principal branches: the analysis and generation of sounds. In the fields of communication and advertising, audio AI aids in scrutinizing complex auditory elements such as music, voices, and sound designs for their acoustic brand fit. It also measures cognitive and perceptual factors, including memorability, level of activation, and emotional valence. This provides decision-makers with a cost-effective, albeit sometimes flawed, quasi-objective second opinion – consider it a form of 'market research lite'. It opens up

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a range of supplementary applications such as musical similarity searches or alignment with musical trends on social media platforms.

Equally, audio AI systems can be employed for the analysis of complex real-time audio applications, for instance, in voice analysis, particularly within the context of call centers. Utilizing just the voice, AI can infer the emotional state of the caller and, when combined with generative AI, produce brand-aligned action recommendations for the call center agent.

Conversely, generative audio AI facilitates the production of audio content. Use cases include the complete generation of audio ads with voices and music (see Aflorithmic, Adthos, Omnicon's SARA for reference). Elements of sonic branding can be generated in real-time. Voice models prove to be beneficial and time-efficient in AV media production. Generated voices are also currently employed for podcasts or news bulletins. This represents but a fraction of what is currently feasible, and the capabilities are improving and expanding with each passing week.

HOW TRULY USEFUL ARE AUDIO AI TOOLS?

The utility of audio AI tools is a subject of considerable debate. The plethora of potential applications stands in stark contrast to their actual relevance and functionality for a specific enterprise: Here, we must subject audio AI to rigorous reality checks.

For instance, generative systems, whether in speech production or music creation, have yet to attain the necessary technical and aesthetic quality to be convincingly comparable to genuine recordings. Technical proficiency, such as the correct pronunciation of specialized terminologies, neologisms, or contextually nuanced words, especially in German language, is equally essential. Depending on the algorithm, the error rate in generated speech could be as high as 1%. If one in every hundred words has the potential to be mispronounced, such a system is not yet viable for automated scenarios. Additionally, on the content side, neither language nor music models can yet emulate anything resembling creative intent: the artificial melody meanders aimlessly, and generated music lacks meaningful progression. As listeners, we quickly become disengaged—a decidedly undesirable outcome for advertisers. While intensive prompting could theoretically mitigate this, it would require such an additional workload that any notion of savings or automation would be lost. Essentially, it would redistribute work rather than reduce it.

On the other hand, analytical systems, or machine learning, are known to raise a myriad of legal, economic, strategic, and ethical questions. We are still awaiting answers to many of these questions from policymakers, particularly but not exclusively in Germany. In the absence of such guidance, companies must define their own policies with a keen eye on potential legal developments, public perception, and economic objectives. When it comes to the actual applications of analytical audio AI, we can consider the previously outlined scenarios: ad hoc analysis of music, speech, and sound designs relies on vast amounts of data, the origins of which are often unclear and the validity for a specific market not guaranteed. For call center applications, every communication between agent and client would be analyzed—raising questions of how to prevent discrimination and what actions the agent should take if the algorithm provides incorrect recommendations. Furthermore, the development and

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implementation of these specialized systems require significant resources, a fact that can be overshadowed by the multitude of "turnkey" solutions in generative audio AI.

OUTLOOK: STRATEGIC IMPLEMENTATION IS CRUCIAL FOR AUDIO AI – QUICK FIXES ARE OFTEN ILLUSORY.

The deployment of audio AI, aside from a few specific standalone applications, will not initially result in cost savings; instead, it requires substantial investment. However, this opens the potential for entirely novel forms of interaction between brands and their customers.

In the continued examination of audio AI, it is essential to build a bridge between the ideal conception and actual applicability. Here, strategy is of the essence, which we methodically develop in workshops with our clients:

- The desired scenario: How might analytical or generative audio AI techniques actually refine processes, enhance efficiency, and heighten effectiveness? Are there viable alternatives?

- The initial analysis: What data is necessary? Which off-the-shelf tools are beneficial, and which need to be custom-developed? What internal and external working groups are indispensable?

- The projection: What legal and ethical considerations arise? How might customers and staff respond? How should the system be optimized, and on what basis does it self-improve? How do we empower employees to adeptly navigate the new systems?

The responses to these inquiries are profoundly individual and consistently underscore that with audio AI, the emphasis shifts from the tools themselves to innovative strategies founded on new, hitherto non-existent opportunities. By harmonizing a realistic set of expectations with technical acumen and inventive strategies, we can forge the path for a judicious integration of audio AI into the domain of corporate communication and the sphere of brand experiences. This necessitates the collaboration of interdisciplinary teams: it is insufficient for merely the Branding Department and Design to convene; it requires the inclusion of all potentially affected departments and individuals—this approach is vital to avoid the streetlight effect, that is, the propensity to search for solutions only within the comfort zone of familiar territory. If this endeavor proves successful, then a plethora of new communication modalities, personalized engagements, and immersive experiences await: for the inquisitive and pioneering brands that are now poised to pose the right questions.

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