


[Advertise](#) [People](#) [Lists](#) [Jobs](#) [Classifieds](#) [Public Notices](#)[Newsletters](#)[Podcast](#)[Contact Us](#)Logged in as [Dave Lindquist](#)[My Account](#) [Log Out](#) 

Modern music careers are built on online fan data

September 30, 2022 | [Dave Lindquist](#)

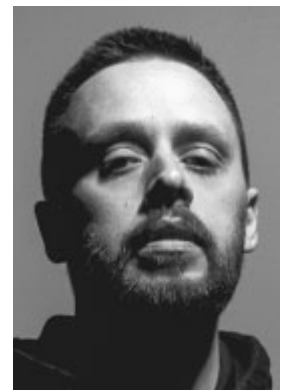
KEYWORDS [ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT](#) / [TECHNOLOGY](#)

In the era when Owen Thomas sang and played guitar in the Elms, an Indiana rock band that released a major-label album in 2006, first-week sales largely determined a recording's success or failure.

Thomas describes a sink-or-swim scenario in which companies primarily spent promotional money at the launch of a project. "If after the first week it didn't appear this thing had legs, you had a little bit of a problem," he said.

Today, Thomas is creative director of Indianapolis-based artist development agency Absorb, and he's patient with music that enters a landscape crowded by TikTok content, YouTube creators and thousands of songs uploaded daily to Spotify.

Thanks to online analytics, musicians and their management teams aren't clueless about what listeners take or leave. Mandolin, the Indianapolis startup that found success as a concert livestreaming platform



Owen Thomas

during the pandemic, is building the next phase of its business on helping artists own and understand data collected from fans.

This summer, Mandolin introduced two online products marketed to musicians: Fan Navigator, which aggregates data into a dashboard and offers suggestions for making the most of the information, and Fan Pages, a public-facing “link in bio” tool that collects data from social media followers.

Not everyone has waited for specialty tools, though, to begin using data.

Absorb, which is not affiliated with Mandolin, monitors online activity and waits for a song to “raise its hand,” as Thomas says, when the time is right for heavy promotion.

“Pressure,” a song by Indianapolis-based musician Bayem, was released in August 2020. At that time, Absorb spent a modest amount on advertising and pitched the tune to playlist curators and other tastemakers.

Nearly two years later, the Hulu series “The Kardashians” licensed “Pressure” and included the song in the show’s season finale.

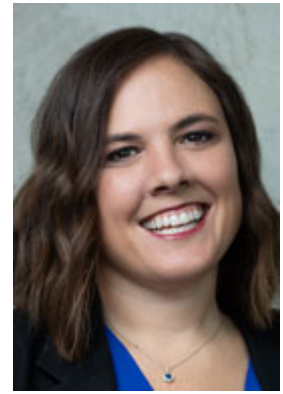
Seeing online interest in “Pressure” spike, Thomas and Absorb then “poured gas on the fire” to promote the song that now has more than 370,000 plays at Spotify.

“We will hyper-target our ads on Instagram, Facebook, TikTok and whatever in the places where a song is starting to pop,” Thomas said. “You can get surgical with social media marketing, ascertaining who the fan base is and what cities they’re in.”

Mandolin, named 2022’s “Most Innovative Music Company” by Fast Company magazine, paid

attention to its customers who purchased virtual performances by artists such as Lil' Wayne, Grace Potter, and Fitz and the Tantrums.

"In the first 18 months of the company, we focused on the livestreaming product," said Mary Kay Huse, Mandolin's co-founder and CEO. "We built out a tool set where people could go in and see not just who [was] buying tickets but how they were engaging on the livestream and who was upgrading for VIP and merch."



Mary Kay Huse

With Fan Navigator and Fan Pages, the company is bolstering its position as a self-described "digital fan engagement platform."

Huse, who's been selected for Billboard magazine lists of "Agents of Change" and "Women in Music Top Executives," said fan data is crucial in building careers.

"We knew livestreaming was going to be a near-term opportunity, with the pandemic being this forcing function of adoption and usage," Huse said. "Artists needed replacement revenue for touring. We always had in the back of our mind what we saw as a broader direct-to-consumer transformation for the industry."



The Lumineers, shown in Tampa, Florida, last spring, are one of Mandolin's biggest clients. The band uses a Mandolin fan page in conjunction with its Instagram profile and used Mandolin's platform to livestream a Chicago concert on Sept. 3. (AP photo)

New tools

Huse characterizes Fan Navigator as a unified overview of fan activity. The product's dashboard integrates online sales, email lists, social media audiences and streams on digital service providers such as Spotify.

Mandolin enlisted fellow fan engagement startup Chartmetric, a California-based company, for its aggregation of streaming and social statistics.

Fan profiles include information ranging from email addresses to past ticket purchases. People are categorized as potential fans, fans or superfans.

Huse said the goal is to cultivate “wanted and valuable engagement between the artist and the fan.”

From a bottom-line perspective, Fan Navigator aspires to help musicians sell more livestream tickets, more tickets on tour, and more souvenirs and recorded music.


“Everything we do is to either increase fandom or increase revenue or, ideally, both,” Huse said.

On Sept. 3, Mandolin streamed a concert by one of its biggest clients, multiplatinum-selling band the Lumineers, from Chicago’s Wrigley Field. The Lumineers use a Mandolin Fan Page as the “link in bio” at Instagram, where the band has 1 million followers.

Other artists using Fan Pages, a free service provided by Mandolin, include Ben Folds, who has 91,000 Instagram followers.

Each Fan Page includes a “follow” button that invites visitors to register an email address or connect via Google or Facebook profiles.

Huse said social media platforms are useful for fan acquisition but not for managing one-to-one engagement between artists and fans.

“We developed Fan Pages to convert this unknown universe into a known universe,” said Huse, who grew up in Lebanon and graduated from  [DePauw University](https://www.depauw.edu/) in 2002.

Conceptualized through venture studio High Alpha, Mandolin launched in June 2020 and raised \$5 million in seed round capital. In June 2021, Mandolin announced \$12 million in Series A financing.

The \$12 million has been used for research and development as well as go-to-market efforts for Fan Navigator, Fan Pages and

livestreaming. The company is not presently pursuing Series B financing, Huse said.

Even with concert tours returning in full force, Mandolin streams 50 to 75 concerts per month.

Looking ahead, Huse said the music industry needs to accommodate artists who emerge at SoundCloud, YouTube and TikTok without a history of concert performances.

“I’m not saying touring is going to go away by any means, but I think there’s going to be a growing demand for more digital engagement,” she said.

Mandolin’s unified theory

Fan Navigator is an online tool that Indianapolis-based Mandolin markets to musicians for the purpose of unifying data collected through fan activity. Fan Navigator’s dashboard integrates the following:

Selected data sources

Shopify product sales
Square transactions
Stripe transactions
Mailchimp email lists
Facebook interactions

Instagram followers

TikTok followers
Twitter followers
Pandora streams
Spotify streams
SoundCloud streams

Elements of fan profiles

email addresses
hometowns
past ticket purchases
past merchandise purchases
status as “potential fan,”
“fan” or “superfan”

Selected goals

Sell more livestream tickets.
Sell more tickets on tour.
Grow Spotify following.
Increase merchandise sales.
Increase music streams
and sales.

Sources: Mandolin, IBJ research

Independent style

The Rev. Peyton’s Big Damn Band, a hard-touring blues trio based in Brown County, stayed solvent during the pandemic in large part by paying attention to data.

For example, band member Breezy Peyton said the group scheduled livestreams based on online research.

“We looked at the time of day based on the time zones where people were watching,” she said. “We realized, ‘Wow, most of our donations came from



Breezy Peyton

the U.S.,’ even though a fourth of our income generally comes from Europe because we do very well over there. But when it came to donations, it wasn’t necessarily that way.”

The Rev. Josh Peyton, who’s married to Breezy, said it’s not easy to know what will work, what won’t work and why.

“Chicago is our biggest Spotify city,” he said. “But that may not translate to ticket sales. I know Chicago is way bigger on Spotify than Cincinnati. But we sell more tickets in Cincinnati. There’s alchemy involved in this. It’s art, it’s music. If I knew why, I probably would be a multimillionaire.”

Peyton said he believes listening habits play a role in what might be deceptive in online fan data.

“You tap into a certain listening audience in a certain way, but maybe they’re not the audience that buys tickets to shows,” he said. “Or maybe the ones who buy tickets to shows don’t spend as much time on Spotify because they’re spinning the vinyl.”



Josh Peyton

Peyton and Mandolin CEO Huse mentioned membership platform Patreon as a way musicians are connecting directly with listeners.

The Big Damn Band launched its Patreon profile in March 2020, and Peyton said the resulting membership subscriptions have helped pay for an in-progress home recording studio.

He said the band, which plans to return to Europe for a run of dates next spring, enjoys interacting with fans who appreciate behind-the-scenes content.

“We can say, ‘Hey, let’s see what we can throw out to our fan base who we know are on the team,’” he said. “If something doesn’t quite hit with them, it’s not going to be the end of the world. If they’re not 100% into that thing, they know real soon there will be more on the way.”

Using the numbers

Huse said it’s common for artists to leave money on the table by failing to maximize their earning potential from “superfans.” Studying data can turn that around.

“We learned with livestreaming that it’s very much a superfan offering,” Huse said. “The wonderful thing about artists is the brand they have with their followers. They almost have an unlimited amount of demand for their content. Superfans want more content, more merch and more music.”

But supplying artists with fan data isn’t helpful, Huse said, without also providing playbooks for reaching goals.

“We’ve been able to say, ‘Hey, these people have shown a propensity to buy a livestream, but they haven’t bought a livestream from you. So let’s target them,’” Huse said. “We have client-success managers who hop into the account with the artist’s team to make sure they understand the data we have for that artist and their upcoming goals and plans.”

Thomas said he doesn’t dwell on analytics when talking with his Absorb artists.

“I want people to discover our artists because of the music as opposed to virality or even because of the personality,” Thomas said. “I think if they find the artists because of the music, they tend to position them mentally in a certain way. What I’m after is that perceptive value where they think of them as an artist first.”

Huse said it's clear that livestream audiences respond to Mandolin events at iconic concert venues such as Nashville's Ryman Auditorium and Colorado's Red Rocks Amphitheatre.

"Not only do people want to see that artist, but they want to see that artist in that specific venue—and they may never get there," Huse said. "There is definitely an art. It's not all science. Even as a data and technology person, I see an art to live music. That will never go away."•

Editor's note: Please note our [updated comment policy](#) that will govern how comments are moderated.