

In bed with Madonna, a laptop and a modem

WHEN I was 12, one of my friends told me that I "looked and acted like Madonna". This misplaced awe was based on an extremely dodgy perm and the fact that I'd been to a Radio 1 roadshow in Bournemouth.

Fifteen years later, we are all apparently still in awe of the real thing. Nine million viewers logged on to MSN to watch the very sleek, unpermed singer's concert at Brixton Academy, which tripled the audience figures for the MSN webcast of Paul McCartney's gig at the Cavern Club last year.

Fortunate enough to see the performance from the sweaty, celeb-packed confines of the Academy, I have to say there are some things the webcast didn't show, such as Guy Ritchie shouting for more as his "missus" left the stage.

Microsoft is reported to have spent around £30m promoting the event, as part of its brand-building exercise. One MSN representative summed up the question of whether the webcast had been a success with: "Yes, thank God".

But aside from my colleagues who watched the webcast from the comfort of the MSN party in Brick Lane, others reported a less than perfect experience when using a 56k connection.

The gig was believed to be a taster of a world tour next year, with suggestions Madge could do it from her Notting Hill home and we'll all watch it over the internet. I can just see myself sitting there, waving a lighter in the air in front of my laptop with my curlers in.

And the winner is...

"£30m is a ridiculous amount of money," scoffed the MSN bod on my table at the first Online Music Awards at the Roundhouse in Camden, north London, just days before the Madonna gig. She wasn't ridiculing the marketing dosh spent on Madonna but the reports that MSN had paid the material girl that amount for



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the rights to the gig. No money changed hands, we are told. Which, if true, highlights the fact that the internet has altered forever the economic dynamics of the music industry stands. Its not just the headline-grabbing Napster, winners of the online pioneer award, but the fact that the internet has become central to so many artists' promotions.

The Madonna gig wasn't about instant payment - it's not as if Rocco and Lourdes are wearing tight-fitting shoes - it was about promotion of her album and MSN's website.

Some artists are hands-on, such as Pete Townshend, who posts news on his site (www.petetownshend.com) as it breaks. Others, such as the band Toploader, take a more laid-back approach to the biggest revolution the music biz has seen, as their acceptance speech for best pop artist website revealed. The lead singer, who had arrived fresh from the Top of the Pops studio, drawled: "This is the first award we've ever won and we had fuck all to do with it."

VitaGO is no go

Typical isn't it? I find a health and beauty site selling something I actually want (a Clarins cleanser), rather than a range of obscure and extortionately priced lotions and pills, and it takes its skin care, its vitamins, its elixirs of life and decides to sell its UK operation.

The German-based VitaGO is looking for a buyer for its UK arm, which went live in April and employs 15 staff. It is also winding down operations in Italy and looking to run its French site as a separate entity. The company denied that the UK was a particular problem, saying that the decision was based on a need to focus on the German market in order to become profitable, but blames offline players who are becoming more active online.

It's not doing badly. In March, VitaGO received second-round funding from investors and it still has around £10.8m in the bank. It's just that rivals such as Thinknatural.com are set to launch an offline brand through Superdrug, which has itself just launched its own e-commerce site.

It seems that the rumble of high street names putting the jitters up pure dot.com companies is becoming louder. The message seems to be: link up or go home.

Text-crazed teens

If you are anything like me, the recent floods and train failures have meant you've spent a lot more time than is healthy on buses. If so, you'll have noticed that groups of teenagers receive more text messages in one bus journey than most of us will receive in our lifetimes. I read this week that female teenage smoking is down by 30

per cent and confectionery consumption by 10 per cent because of money being spent on pre-pay mobile phone cards. SMS text messaging is an under-utilised marketing tool that has demonstrated a remarkable response rate in the few promotions it has carried.

Wireless marketing company Flytxt has just kicked off an SMS promotion for EMAP's *Smash Hits*, which will continue over five concerts leading up to the Poll Winners' Party on Sunday night. Teenage audiences are prompted to get their phones out and send a message to sign up to the *Smash Hits* exclusive club, to receive gossip about their favourite artists, and play interactive games.

Flytxt said that many teenagers sent personal messages, demonstrating their willingness to engage with the medium. A member of the Wireless Marketing Association, Flytxt is thinking of compiling a blacklist of spammers to safeguard users.

The VP of business development was horrified to receive a message at 11pm the other night highlighting a TV show at 1.35am. "I don't even have a TV," he said. "One minute you are signing up for SMS horoscopes from a site, the next you are receiving a promotional offer for sushi delivery. Consumers are not going to put up with that."

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