



Creative Services

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You have had your first album cover designed since junior high, right? Well, the Creative Services department of your record label is made up of the people who are going to make it real -- or shoot it down, depending on your idea.

In tandem with your product manager, the creative services department is responsible for the creation of all the visual elements that go along with your album's release. Beginning with the album cover and package design -- including single covers, posters and other display material, logos, advertising, stickers and more -- all fit together cohesively with your album art.

One of the very first steps in the process of your album release (sometimes even before having a product manager assigned) is a meeting with the head of the Creative Services department. This person will already know lots about you, having heard your music, read your bio and formed an idea of who you are. This person will come to the table prepared to discuss the ideas that he or she has already formulated, will introduce you to the art director that he/she has chosen to work on your project, and gently suggest a direction for your artwork/album cover based on their initial thoughts. Then you'll hit 'em with the idea you've had since junior high.

Your precious idea might just work. But remember that these people are trained professionals with an eye for what works and what doesn't. There are many factors to consider when designing an album cover, and you will learn a lot about it. And even though the bass player in your band is a graphic artist, or your friend from high school designed your logo, it is best to at least listen to and consider what the creative department at your label has to say.

At this point, you may want to review the StarPolish section on [Presentation Materials](#), which deals with related issues.

The Photo Session

After a general concept is established and agreed upon, your art director will call in "books" of photographers for you to consider for your first photo session. An array of photographers' portfolios will be strewn before you. It might seem intimidating or impersonal, having to choose a photographer who is supposed to encapsulate your very soul from a pile of portfolios. But it's really a fun and natural process because you will instinctively gravitate toward one or two of them based on a look, a feel, the content or the presentation of the book. Your art director will talk to you about your options and tell you a bit about each photographer as you're making your decision.

Once you have made this momentous decision, you will have a meeting with your photographer, your art director and perhaps a stylist. The photographer will talk to you about locations, backgrounds, color, lights, sets, props, etc. The stylist will talk to you about clothes, style, hair, makeup (or lack thereof). Your art director will lead you through this whole process and help you ask the right questions and make the right decisions.

Package Design

After you have approved a nice big fat selection of both black-and-white and color photos from your fabulous photo session (your company needs *lots* of approved photos for publicity, posters, website, etc), the process of designing the package begins. By this point, you and your art director will have already discussed cover concepts ad nauseum, so he or she will have a clear direction. You will be shown four or five comps (composites - a word that goes back to the cut-and-paste days of layout) of different design options for a cover, and you will choose one.

Did you get that? You will choose one. You will not make the art director go back to square one and start all over again. You will not complain that he/she didn't understand what you meant by "light green." You will not change your mind now that you've seen it. You will not decide to change the album title and make us start all over again. You will choose one of the comps!

All jokes aside, it's critical to get all opinions and ideas out and in the open *before* the comps are prepared. This will save everyone a lot of time, money, and potential aggravation.

Now is the time to determine your CD package design. Before you show your art director all your favorite album packages, with special cardboard sleeves, and gold-embossed lettering and custom color jewel boxes and foldout 3D posters with a custom-shaped CD, remember that packaging costs are recoupable. Thus, there is good reason for record companies to have *standard packaging*.

CD Booklet: The common standard package consists of an eight-panel booklet, not eight *pages*, but *panels*. A four-color process is much more expensive than black and white, so you usually get "four over one," which means one side is color and one side is black and white. The standard booklet configuration allows for only the front and back covers to be color, with the inside pages being black and white. Hint: you can get more color panels if you choose the folder configuration, which folds up like an accordion and features four-color panels on one side, and four black and white panels on the other side. Be aware that there are significant cost differentials in booklet design choices, and you or your manager will want to be aware of these when discussing design with the creative services department.

CD Label: Standard CD label artwork is two-color.

CD Tray: An opaque black tray is standard. Usually, a clear tray with an image underneath the CD tray is not too far "out of spec" to ask for.

Tray card: The card that goes underneath the tray (which is essentially the back cover of the CD, sometimes called the "inlay card" or "spine sheet") is usually four over none. This means there is four-color artwork on the outer side, and nothing on the other side, since it's hidden under the opaque black tray. Again, four-color on both sides, if you want an image under a clear tray, is reasonable.

Four color: Four-color process is normal. Gold or silver is considered a *fifth* color, and out of spec.

Note: If you absolutely must have special packaging, you can try to appeal the standards by asking for a "limited edition" or "initial run" of special packaging. A pre-determined number (e.g. 25,000 or 50,000) of special packages will be shipped before your CD is converted to a standard package. Reminder: the cost of anything above standard is still recoupable.

Single

Unless you are an R&B act or a pure Top 40 artist, you won't be releasing a commercial single. However, your "single" or emphasis track is packaged separately from the album (there might be a remix or radio edit) and is delivered to radio. Your freedom for unique packaging styles is a little greater with your "single" or "CD Pro" (promotional CD, basically). But before you deliberate and over think this one, remember that this piece is not commercially available; it is for *radio programmers only*. A limited quantity of about 5,000 will be manufactured and they are circulated within the industry. You will never see a CD Pro anywhere outside a record company or a radio station unless it ends up on eBay.

If there is a commercial single in your future, 1.) Congratulations, you must be doing very well, and 2.) Your art director will design the packaging for this too, consistent with the album imaging and within the ever-changing standards for single packaging.

Visual Elements

The rest of the visual elements that are generated from the Creative Services department all tie in with your album artwork. In other words, everything is consistent.

All P.O.P. (Point Of Purchase) materials are either blow-ups of the actual album art, or some version thereof.

P.O.P. consists of anything used for display material in a retail store: posters, flats (12" x 12" cardboard poster versions of your album cover), streamers, CD header cards (the divider cards in the CD bins), counter bin displays, shelf talkers (a display item for a stack of cassettes), mobiles and beyond.

Standard P.O.P. for new artists is usually limited to a poster and a flat. Nowadays, retail display space is so hard to come by, smart companies are looking to combine the two items. A combination poster/flat with a perforation to separate them and a space at the bottom to post tour information is a very popular, efficient and functional piece of P.O.P. The days of the 2' x 3' artist poster are sadly dwindling (unless of course you're designing P.O.P. for Madonna).

Advertising Elements

In the fortunate scenario that your label is placing print advertising on behalf of your record (print advertising is often cost prohibitive and is forsaken for smarter, targeted "micro-marketing"), the art department designs a print ad to look consistent with your album package. The copy for the ad is usually sparse and is created by a joint effort between copywriters and your product manager.

National radio and television advertising is even *more* cost prohibitive, but because advertising plans can be executed on a local level, product managers often utilize these media as micro-marketing tools. A production company produces radio and TV spots under the product manager's direction. The larger the company, the more likely it is that an in-house production team exists. If not, creative services may not even be involved, and the product manager is solely responsible for the creation and production of TV and radio spots.

Tip sheet advertising (for a full explanation/details, see my section on [Promotion](#)) is also generated from the creative services department, under the direction of the product manager. And like the CD Pro, this mysterious element of the record business will never see the light of day outside a record company or a radio station.

Usually, the tip sheet artwork is the same as the CD Pro artwork, and requires no further effort on your part.

For the tip sheet ad, it's probably more important than anything else that your manager's credit is spelled correctly, as this ad is directed at the industry and generating airplay and business for your act.