

Have radio doctor's kit, will travel

More than 200 outlets call in outside specialists to diagnose and treat weaknesses; here's the doctor-patient thinking

A growing number of radio stations these days are willingly undergoing rigorous analysis by outsiders. They're submitting to intimate examination, from the opening of logs to the baring of innermost financial secrets. In doing so, they are often inviting devastating critiques of established practices and procedures, even sometimes of cherished accomplishments. They promise to honor and obey virtual strangers, are accepting and acting on advice that may mean the cancellation of a long-time favorite program, or, maybe worse, the firing of a long-time favorite employe. A growing number of radio stations are parties to these seeming indignities because they are convinced that in this fast, fickle, foot-loose age they have no other economically feasible choice.

Radio's increasingly blue-chip status is emphasized by BROADCASTING's annual estimates of radio time sales which show billings are now above the billion-dollar level. Estimates for 1968 radio billings came to \$1,085,002,000 (BROADCASTING, Jan. 27).

It used to be that a lot of individual people owned radio stations for a lot of different reasons. Some considered radio a hobby or perhaps a status symbol or maybe even a necessary evil that was better in their hands than out of them. For some, too, this was a form of show business and throughout the industry the emphasis seemed to be more on show than on business. The stamp of professionalism was a collector's item. Many radio people programmed by the seat of their pants. It could be that's why so many failed (as recently as 1966, more than 1,000 radio stations in the country were losing money).

Television changed the ball game for keeps. The radio network switch lost its magic. Many of the best of radio men shifted to the newer medium. Young broadcasting talent also passed radio by. Radio's skills bank has been working on short margin.

Yet the bright, innovative people who remained with radio (such men as the late Todd Storz and Gordon McLendon) evolved the modern pattern for radio prosperity. Programing formats and subformats proliferated. The

right format generated the sound that captured the fancies of the listening public. That sound can't be permitted to get sick, tired, hackneyed. For higher ratings invariably follow highly accepted sounds. There can be no quarreling with this relationship. The pay-off, ultimately, is in more national and local advertising dollars.

So now radio owners can't afford to program what they personally like best or what their wives tell them will work. They're playing for big stakes. Multi-million-dollar corporations are pitted against multimillion-dollar group organizations. There can't be ifs or buts or sentiment about it.

It's a young people's world. Pinpoint what this new audience wants to hear. Zero in on the right format, produce the "in" sound. Then in a fast, flip, hip way, sock it to them.

There's only one direction to go if a station really means to compete. That's up, up and away to number-one position in the market. And the fight to be number one can't be predicated on status, or powered by image, or left to chance. You either win or lose with a quick throw of the dice. The sound of success, the call to ratings and audience composition and billowing billings has to be planned, programmed, promoted out of sight. It can't be left to the farmhands, the thinking goes. It's time to call in the pros in programing, the experts, the specialists—the radio consultants, or more colloquially, the radio doctors.

The evidence is that more than 200 stations across the country have put themselves in the hands of radio doctors during the last eight years. In most cases, the diagnosis and treatment received have covered everything involved in radio station operations, including management. But the emphasis nearly always, the real area of specialization, is in programing.

"I think a radio station is in business to get an audience, to serve that audience, and to sell the sponsor's products," remarks Chuck Blore of the Hollywood consulting firm of Programing db. "I think the programing is all-important and that the sales will follow. And if you don't have any programing,

it's awfully hard to sell a radio station."

Says radio consultant Ted Randal of Hollywood: "Our major function is to acquire the most audience for any radio station we deal with. I believe a consultant is one who is responsible for a radio station's ratings, for actually acquiring ratings, not just for giving some advice and not worrying about the station any more."

Who are these ratings-makers? The breed includes sales-promotion people, production managers, public-relations planters, even station general managers. Most of them, though, were once popular disk jockeys who moved up to become program directors eager to implement on a wider scale what practical experience taught them will work with audiences. All must be knowledgeable, constantly aware, have had great training. All must have competed enough times, done battle enough, hopefully at the top-market level, so that they know with confidence what will win and what won't. They have to believe that they can compete better than anyone else. But their most apparent common denominator is a talent for objectivity.

"I liken it to an efficiency expert," points out radio-doctor Paul Drew of Philadelphia. "You've got to be able to come into a market and stand back and observe and give someone an objective analysis of what their problems are and what the problems are at some of the competing stations. You try to advise them objectively on how they can best serve the public, and themselves, in boosting ratings and their position in the market."

It adds up to an independent fraternity of lone-wolf operators. "We like to be on our own," explains Ted Randal. "We don't like to have other people tell us what to do."

There are more radio doctors with their shingle out today than ever before. BROADCASTING spoke to eight who work at radio consultation full-time. There are a number of others, most, though, part-timers, or in-and-outers. A program director of some reputation loses his job, hires out as a consultant until a steady position opens. Another PD, makes a station move spectacularly,