



new fall season

# CHR's Keys to Success

Have they changed over the years?

By Alan Burns

Seven years ago I wrote an article listing the principles of successful CHR radio according to a group of programmers and executives who'd been among the most successful in the format. People like John Gehron, Steve Rivers, Jimmy DeCastro and others contributed their thoughts to a great playbook that went beyond basics like "Play hit records, and play them often."

Has anything changed in the past seven years? For this CHR special I bounced those rules off of some today's best CHR PDs: Todd Cavanah of WBBM-FM (B96)/Chicago; Tom Poleman of WHTZ (Z100)/New York; Chris Shebel of WDCG (G105)/Raleigh; Jimmy Steele of WNCI/Columbus, OH; and Jon Zellner of KMXV/Kansas City.

While the group voted to keep all the original rules, they did add a couple of new ones and offered some insightful comments about several of the originals.

## Great Radio Is Real

**Be fun.** This is the most important commandment, according to Steele. "We don't save the lives of people in burning buildings for a living," he says. "If you aren't having fun, the competitor who is having fun will beat you at the end of the day. Keep in mind that great radio isn't composed of just 'funny'; it's made of the compound called 'entertainment,' which includes fun, funny, sad, mad, glad — real!"

Shebel says, "It's amazing how many stations become jukeboxes after 10am. People now have MP3 players that do a much better job of playing songs than we



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do, so we must offer more."

And KMXV helmsman Jon Zellner notes, "When Top 40 is in a down cycle, it's the nonmusic elements that will help us win."

**Get the best morning show money can buy.** "Absolutely!" says Shebel, whose morning team of Bob & Madison is frequently No. 1 25-54 in Raleigh. "A great morning

show will always be more memorable to a listener than the most flawless 'A' rotation."

**Be what you are. Don't try to be something else.** Poleman says, "Something I would add is, 'Know thy market brand position.' Perhaps that's another way of saying 'Be what you are.' The reality is that no two CHRs can ever be programmed identically because the market conditions are always slightly different from town to town."

"It's imperative to understand the type of CHR position that you're occupying in your market. Remember, the longer your brand is consistent, the more listeners develop brand expectations and loyalty. Be mindful of those brand expectations as music trends come and go."

## Focus On The Bottom

**Shoot the first person who says, "We need to go after adults."** "As less is more, younger can bring older," says Steele. "The WNCI night show is No. 1 25-54. The same programming would kill adults in the midday. Everybody believes they are hip and young. Program to adults, and lose your bottom. Focus on the bottom, and you will find adults."

**Always program for cume.** KMXV and WNCI both tend to have higher TSL than most CHRs, but their programmers don't believe in trying to stretch listening spans. As Zellner notes, TSL doesn't necessarily mean listening longer, it usually means tuning in on one or two more occasions.

People can only listen to the radio for 22 minutes if their commute lasts that long. The key is to give them something so compelling that they're forced to listen when they get to their next location.

Steele concurs, saying, "Don't try to win TSL by playing the TSL game. At McDonald's the owner won't benefit by getting you to stay longer when you visit for lunch. As a matter of fact, they want you in and out. They will benefit by getting you to visit more often."

## Play Good Defense

**New rule: Focus on your audience, not the competition.** Cavanah says, "I see PDs who worry so much about their competition that they lose focus on their own listeners. Yes, it's important to know what the stations up or down the dial are doing, but don't be so obsessed with them that you lose track of your own game plan."

"It's not what you do right that wins the war; it's what you do wrong that will kill you. In football it's very sexy to throw the long ball, but the teams that are a little more conservative, don't fumble on the goal line and play good defense usually win the game."

**Keep the tempo high.** This rule generally gets universal agreement, but Steele offers a caution not to overlook great, emotional ballads. "Ballads are big, especially with the young end," he says. "What happened to 'our song'?"

"I stay away from ballads as oldies, but as a current hit, refer to the rule that says 'Never ignore a No. 1 song.' Don't mix sound code and tempo with passion for the product. Don't overthink for your consumers."

**Market it — not only with ad dollars, but also by being active.** Zellner suggests that if marketing dollars aren't available, market yourselves on the air. "Absolutely!" says Steele. "Too many pro-

grammers spend so much time whining about not having enough marketing money that they are spending less time using the tools they do have and developing and creating tools and new marketing concepts."

## The Top 40 Lifestyle

**Hire creative talent and motivate them.** Hiring creative talent is a big key for Zellner. "Find people who live the lifestyle of your listeners, and teach them good radio," he says. "I remember Adam Cook telling me that he once hired

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one of the tour guides at Disney who had no radio experience because of her personality."

Keeping that talent motivated is also crucial. As Steele points out, "The most important element of your radio station is the person who is on the air right now. That person has the utmost power to positively or negatively brand your product. Inspire your team. Help them find fun in what they bring to your product."

**Keep it fresh.** "Freshening the station is something we need to remind ourselves about constantly," says Zellner. "How can we use what's happening in the world on the air? Every week our staff meets, and we go around the room. Everyone throws out one thing, and we see what we can do with it. Top 40 radio is a lifestyle, and it should reflect pop culture whenever possible."

While keeping it fresh, Steele warns us not to get so obsessed with changing promos that a given message doesn't connect with your core and a strong percentage of cume. "Cable networks like the Discovery Channel get this well," he says.

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## The CHR Playbook

Here are the rules of good CHR/Pop radio, as written and amended by Alan Burns, Todd Cavanah, Jimmy DeCastro, Gerry DeFrancesco, Bill Drake, John Gehron, Gordon McLendon, Tom Poleman, Steve Rivers, Chris Shebel, Jimmy Steele, Todd Storz, Jon Zellner and many others.

- Be fun. Hire creative, comedic talent. Motivate your team.
- Shoot the first person who says, "We need adults."
- Never lose sight of the fact that you're programming for cume.
- Be what you are. Don't try to be something you're not.
- Keep it fresh. Introduce new elements to your station on a regular basis.
- Don't be "today," be "this minute."
- Spend time on your production.
- Spare no expense in getting the best morning show money can buy.
- Create talk. Be topical at all times.
- Never ignore a No. 1 song, regardless of what you think it sounds like or who sings it.
- Shorten your list; research your top competitors and add their huge records.
- Focus more on your audience than the competition.
- Keep the music tempo up, but don't ignore great ballads.
- Research your core to keep them happy and your cume to grow your core.
- Market it — not only with advertising dollars, but also by being active with the audience.
- Promote larger than life.