

RATINGS AND RESEARCH

Turn Your Research Into Ratings

By Rick Sklar

It happens in market after market. The research at Station A shows the audience wants more uninterrupted music. Station A begins playing eight records in a row. Competitor Station B counters with 12 records back to back. Station A ups the ante to 16 songs in a row and adds the forced listening ploy, "We'll pay you \$1000 if you catch us playing less." Station B goes into an all-weekend non-stop music marathon. By now the listeners aren't sure to which station they're listening, and they really couldn't care less.

They've heard it all before. Both stations have become one great big yawn. It all sounds the same, and it's time to turn off the radio and slip a cassette into the car's tape deck. Now the listener has unlimited songs in a row, with absolutely no commercial interruptions. Ever.

There must be a more effective way to get ratings.

What has occurred is a situation where both stations went about applying their research in a very mundane and mechanical way. Neither programmer remembered that radio is a form of show business. Listeners tune in to be entertained. They want diversion. If the message has to be "we play the most music" then, at the very least, the station using the idea might do it in an innovative manner.

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For example, when a "most music" war broke out in one market, the station being attacked didn't let itself get dragged into the "X-number of songs in a row" war. Instead, it took an imaginative new tack. After doing some quick calculations on its programming over the past ten years, its announcers were able to come on the air and say: "KISS 94 FM, over 1,000,000 records played! And now, here is record number 1,110,347 on (jingle) KISS 94 FM (into song)."

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Novel? The fast food business has been selling hamburgers that way for years.

Using showmanship is not expensive. It's simply a way to do better radio. A "showbiz" approach to ratings can even be cheaper than the usual routines. One station without any budget built market awareness by announcing it was out to break a world's record by staging the longest concert in history. It got an unknown band to play for the station for free (for the publicity) at a donated concert hall (to bring the world record to the town). The total cost of that innovative piece of showmanship: a charge for a set of radio lines to the venue for progress report broadcasts, and the cost of plastering the stage with enough call letters so no matter what direction the TV news cameras aimed they would have to pick up the station's name.

Whether it's Hands Across America or racing elephants down Main Street on Derby Day, the station that remembers it is in show business invariably winds up the winner. It's the one ingredient that Rick Dees, Dr. Ruth Westheimer, Paul Harvey, and Howard Stern have in common. They never forget that they are in show business. They provide entertainment with a capital "E."

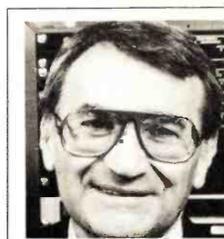
In the super-hot competitive environment in which programmers are called upon to get radio ratings today, stations can't win if the programming effort translates the research into unimaginative and predictable on-air sounds. The reality is that everybody uses research of one type or another. Everybody knows which records are in and which are out. You can't get a leg up on the next guy by simply doing your homework. To get a competitive advantage, the data has to be turned into slambang programming.

This really isn't so hard to do. The first radio formats were put together by operators who were both radio people and showmen. Todd Storz, Gordon McLendon, Chuck Biore, and others designed formats built around jolts of energy. What the listeners heard was unexpected, different, and entertaining.

Somewhere along the line radio programming became so scientific that all sense of suspense, surprise, shock, and sensationalism got squashed out of the sound. Radio, that amalgam of science and art, became all science and no art. If everyone stops after pushing the buttons on the computer, we begin to sound like an industry of imitators, not innovators. The sound-alikes of today are reaping their own meager harvest — similar sounds attract similar shares. In the big markets, big winners with wide multi-share leads separating them from the others are few and far between.

Spreadsheets filled with demographic data on music preferences may not be the most inspiring sources for exciting on-air sounds, but they are not supposed to be. The data is best used only as a

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point of departure. When did you last see a memorable television show, a great movie, or a smash Broadway musical that was based on statistical research alone? Even the records played on the radio are fusions of artistic efforts and research into current public taste.

It is only in radio programming itself that we hear so much personalized, repetitive, and boring stuff. The only time personalities are heard is in the morning. Yet that is also the time of day that attracts the biggest numbers of people to use radio. It is only in the morning that we make use of news on many music stations. Perhaps the audience doesn't want newscasts during the day, but the early rock and roll station pioneers did news bulletins around the clock and perfected their presentation into the ultimate cliffhanger of suspense. The bulletin sounds were ear-arresting — a submarine crash dive alarm, tympani rolls . . . you name it.

And the rule was that the bulletin was always held up until the middle of a record and deliberately run at that time with the bulletin alert sound interrupting the song in a startling way. (The bulletin was always brief, and then the song was started again.) Certainly not everyone would want to run bulletins on music stations today, but breaking in right after a song with a daily lottery winning number bulletin would work very well. And somebody might just get a competitive edge with an unexpected news bulletin once in a while timed for shock value.

One reason programmers may be having so much trouble being creative is because they program to radio groupies — foreground listeners who hear the station the way the PD hears it."

the best performers should be allowed behind the mike. When the on-air light goes on, the station is on stage. The curtain is up.

It's show time.

typical, average listeners until the ratings come in. Then it's too late. By putting themselves in the place of these listeners and imagining the typical listener situation that is really going on out there, programmers can be spurred into coming up with exciting ways to break through the apathy and capture the ear of the listener. This takes quality material, quality performers, and those creative bits of radio programming that touch the audience and move them.

In staffing their stations and in buying program content, be it comedy material or features, programmers need to exercise intense selectivity and control. Only the best material should get on the air. Only

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Put It In Writing

Guest contributors are encouraged to submit queries or finished articles to R&R for use in the Ratings & Research, Sales, Management, and Engineering columns. Articles should be approximately 1250 words, or five to six typed, double-spaced pages. For more information, contact Special Assignments Editor Jim Dawson, R&R, 1930 Century Park West, L.A., CA 90067; (213) 553-4330.

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