



FRANK MINIACI

'Theater Of The Mind' Revisited

Flashbacks to several of radio's greatest on-air promotions

If it isn't Capra, don't do it!" That's what radio pioneer Gordon McClendon preached and it was the mantra of my first radio mentor, KVIL/Dallas morning legend Ron Chapman. (Of course I've modified it to replace the great filmmaker Capra with an updated mogul, Steven Spielberg.) KVIL is the creator of a term that is widely used today: the "Fun & Games Department" — or promotion department, if you will. KVIL developed a reputation for huge promotional budgets, and contest after contest was bigger and better than the last one. This week, in part one of a two-part series, I'll take a look back over the last 25 years at some of radio's most creative promotions.

KVIL originated many promotional staples, such as the Prize Catalog and — the easiest contest to win — the "People's Choice" cash total (just know it and win). Ron Chapman had built such a close relationship between KVIL and the listeners that they would do just about anything he asked them to do. The true power of this was demonstrated with a very ethereal promotion, the \$20 check. A promo ran on the air, telling listeners they should send in \$20 to the station and that they would be part of something special. Chapman had thought that maybe a few hundred or maybe even a thousand or so individuals might send in something, and for that \$20, they would be placed on a special station mailing list and given some station goods, tickets, etc.

What happened next soared past anyone's expectations. Day One produced an estimated \$200,000 in checks; Day Two was just as strong; and on Day Three, Chapman had to go on the air and tell the listeners to stop sending in the money. By the end of the third day, KVIL and Chapman had amassed \$750,000! Besides the national coverage on ABC-TV's *World News Tonight*, the point was proven once again that a well-branded station creates a powerful bond with its audience.

'Ramblin' Raft Race'

The WQXI/Atlanta Ramblin' Raft Race was probably one of the longest-running yearly promotions. It became an Atlanta milestone. VP/GM Jerry Blum recounts the events:

"The raft race took place for the first time in a very nonchalant manner as a challenge from a Georgia Tech fraternity to the WQXI jocks. There was no big meeting between PD Bill Sherard and myself to make this the biggest promotion of all time. The first year, 1968, we had a grand total of about 300 people show up. The next year, about

8000 attended. By the third year, over 30,000 came to watch and participate. At that point, we decided to package the promotion. Coca-Cola, Budweiser, Aztec Suntan Lotion, and Rich's department store became the sponsors. "Visitors came from all over the world to watch hundreds of rafts of every size, shape, and design hit the water and, some-



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— Jack McCoy



times, even sink. We had prizes for designs, but most people came out for a good time. Last year, we ended up doing it without the help of the American Rafting Association, and it cost us upwards of \$250,000. This kind of publicity, though, is hard to put a dollar value on. Unfortunately, the size and many complications killed it. TV and newspaper really led to its demise. In 1978, a television reporter was on camera saying, 'If we don't have a drowning, then we don't have a story.' Then, the last year, the newspaper headlines read, 'Four Feared Drowned At Raft Race.' Actually, only one person drowned, and that was over the 12 years of the event.

"The papers continued to editorialize against us and, in the end, turned the city against the

raft race. The state legislature eventually outlawed it. It was so ridiculous. The raft race represented anywhere from \$2 million to \$5 million in yearly revenues and taxes to the city and state. It was the highest-selling beer and soda day year after year. Now it's gone. But to me, the conception and eventual fulfillment of the WQXI Ramblin' Raft Race was the greatest promotional effort ever."

The KOWH Treasure Hunt

Talk about getting listeners actively involved! This \$100,000 promotion also got local police and government officials very much involved, and eventually led to the banning of future contests involving the disruption of private property by prize-seekers looking for buried treasure. You'll see why after you read the comments of KOWH/Omaha's 1955 afternoon man, Ken Burkhardt.

"KOWH was the first CHR owned by Todd Storz. We were a daytimer, but had a 60 share. We promoted the event for three weeks prior to the event. On the day of the event, I was giving the final clues to the destination. By this point, over 100,000 people were headed for Council Bluffs, just across the river, to dig for the treasure. We had buried it in a farmer's field in a lipstick tube under some hay on the ground. By the time they were through with the field, this farmer never had to plow it again.

"The police were banging on the door, and Todd had told me not to let them in. They called on the phone and asked where he was. I told them they were probably over in Council Bluffs. They went there to arrest him. What made everyone so frantic about the treasure was that the amount of the prize had dropped to \$1000 by the time someone found it. The excitement build-up was tremendous — the field was devastated. By far, this was the best promotion I was ever directly involved with."

Pyramid Power At KMBZ

While the treasure hunts of the '50s and '60s produced laws making them illegal due to the property damage they caused, KMBZ/Kansas City's "Mystery Of The Pyramids" contest was a treasure hunt of the imagination. PD Steve Bell recalls the event: "We did it in the fall of 1978. It was a clue contest with a prize of \$10,000 in gold and jewels. We gave a new clue each day, broadcasting hourly. Our entire

Promo Of The Week



THE CUTTING EDGE! — WAOR/South Bend, IN morning host Woody recently staged "Balding For Dollars," in the tradition of a vintage game show, to raise over \$20,000 for charity while losing his locks.

advertising campaign was based on the contest. KMBZ billboards featured a large treasure chest with contents that sparkled in jewel colors and the message, 'Win \$10,000 in gold and jewels from KMBZ.' The same treasure chest showed up in the hands of our jocks in the station TV spots. All the personalities were costumed outlandishly and photographed with a real, live camel. As a matter of fact, a clue was contained in the television spots. Overall impressions of the spot was that the mystery location was Egypt. It wasn't — it was Mexico.

"Executing the promotion was a real educational experience for me. I read a dozen books on Egypt and on Mexico, studied maps and travel brochures. Postcards were pouring in by the hundreds every day. I had to read every one and stay ahead of the contestants, so to speak. The promotion lasted four weeks. It was a total success. Not only did we have a No. 1 book, we got something very rare: letters of appreciation from contestants who *did not* win! The listeners seemed to be very entertained by the event."

The Last Contest

In the field of outstanding radio promotions, nothing compares to one of the most memorable of all time: the Last Contest, created by the brilliant mind of Jack McCoy. "The Last Contest took over two and a half years from the inception to the first airing, partly because everyone thought I was crazy to run such a contest," McCoy recounts. "Finally, KCBQ/San Diego gave me the go-ahead. The Last Contest was actually a sales promotion that was totally invisible on the air, but brought devastatingly high ratings to the station. I named it the Last Contest because, in those days, if you gave away 30 cars in 30 days, your competition did the same, but added \$10,000 to it. Then you would come back and add a house to it. It ended up causing stations to go broke just trying to outdo each other.

"It was low-budget, but it had

to sound big. The strategy behind it was to have so many promos and unbelievable prizes that, once you got rolling, your competition could never catch up. They couldn't imagine how all of these promos were running, yet the promos never, ever repeated! We offered Ferraris, a Lear jet ... anything outrageous but within reach financially for the station.

"There were many packages that grew in value as the promotion went on. The station would air a secret number during a promo, and the winning caller had to identify the number and could choose any of the packages. The trick, of course, was that the station could afford only *one* of the packages, even though many more had been promoted.

"Each promo — and there were thousands — was elaborately produced with sound effects. Listeners were afraid to turn off the radio for fear of missing a prize package. When I went on to market the contest to about 60 to 70 stations, I must have cut over 15,000 promos. Besides defeating the competition, it ended up blowing out the phones everywhere.

"Of all the stations that ran the Last Contest, only four did not increase their ratings. It was so successful that KCBQ had a 100% share-point lead over the next station. The contest was so successful because only two prizes were actually given away, and the competition was devastated. But it caused such communications problems that I had to pull it off the market."

Thanks to the tremendous content provided by R&R CHR Editor Tony Novia on some of the most memorable promotions in radio history. Next week: R&R continues its look at what makes a difference between the records.

TALK BACK TO R&R!

We encourage your feedback. If you have comments regarding this column or would like to see your work here, contact Frank Miniaci directly at (310) 788-1650 or by e-mail at miniaci@rronline.com.