

Put the magic back in your station

# 10 Secrets To Winning Big



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**W**e've all read about what's lacking in radio, but not much has been said about how to fix it. After years of relentless budget cuts, stations have been stripped of resources and are eagerly looking for solutions. ■ To quote Albert Einstein, "We can't solve problems with the same thinking we used to create them." Moving forward, I'm convinced that the key to creating great radio is more innovation, more engaging content, more entertaining DJs, more production value and more imaginative promotion. ■ With that in mind, here are 10 suggestions guaranteed to pump life back into your station.

**1. Sound real.** Reality shows dominate TV ratings. Real-life Web sites like YouTube rule the Internet. Yet radio has missed the reality trend. Stations often sound too slick, overproduced and predictable. Radio is the only consistently live medium. But we've lost spontaneity and the element of surprise. Hire personalities who can relate, even if their voice isn't ballsy. Reproduce those synthesized jingles with real instruments. Rethink your cliché "10th caller" contests. Re-evaluate your formulaized playlist from a listener's perspective.

**2. Do what an iPod can't.** Five years ago, playing "10 in a row" was a recipe for success. Today it just can't compete against the 3,000 songs on my iPod. And if your listeners don't own MP3 players yet, it's only a matter of time before they do. I recently heard a station boast that it plays "40 minutes of music every hour." Ouch. Clearly, we've taken "more music" as far as we can. Now let's inject personality, creativity and imagination, our strongest advantage over the iPod.

**3. Create a shared experience.** A recent Edison Media Research study notes the importance of finding common ground with your listeners. Whether you target the generation of Elvis, Woodstock or Bonnaroo, they share a bond. Winning stations know that radio is at its best when it hits listeners' hot buttons, be it Batman, "American Idol," Harry Potter, NASCAR or "Guitar Hero." Take ownership of popular trends and weave them into your DJ breaks, promotions and production.

**4. Put on a show.** Why must the fun stop at 10 a.m.? It seems that Geico commercials are more entertaining than most radio programming. If they

can breathe life into the boring insurance business, imagine what you can do with a station. Years ago, KISW/Seattle's competitors were all doing big cash giveaways. We trumped the station with our \$20 million giveaway, a goof promotion that offered \$1 per year for 20 million years. It cost us virtually nothing and made other stations sound boring. Listeners want to be entertained—and music is just one tool. Be timely and topical. Sell new songs with enthusiasm. Embrace new technologies. Encourage better DJ show prep than browsing USA Today.

**5. Context is king.** Some believe that content is king. But listeners now get music whenever and wherever they want, usually for free. When I was the head of marketing at VHI, Joint Communications' John Parikhil gave us the secret to attracting viewers: context the music. By that I mean to package the music and present it in a clever way. Ever wonder why you don't see videos on MTV anymore? Because the ratings tanked. But when songs were packaged in such shows as "Pop-Up Video," "Behind the Music" or "I Love the '80s," ratings soared. Radio can learn a lesson here. To build listener loyalty, context the music with brief vignettes, wrapped with artist info and trivia. A great example is syndicated show "The Deep End With Nick Michaels," a four-hour-long program devoted to seminal rock music from the '60s through the '80s that is largely absent from today's airwaves.

**6. Build a memorable brand.** Arbitron's diary system is a popularity contest. The most memorable brands

win. That said, "Light & Contemporary" isn't a brand. It's just a tired, hollow slogan. The key is to have stationality—a consistent message that weaves through your music mix, personalities, production and promotion. But remember, everything that goes on-air is an investment in your brand, including car dealer remotes, uninspired DJ breaks and lame sales promotions. So craft your brand wisely.

**7. Inject magic between songs.** Winning stations go beyond formatics to engage listeners. When there were only CDs and radio to choose from, we were in control. Now we compete against 125 million iPods, 17 million satellite radios and 36,000 Internet radio channels. Want to increase your station's cume and TSL? Give listeners interesting and fun reasons to tune in. KTCL/Denver spotlights new songs with a New Music Grenade, a highly produced piece that explodes on-air to introduce upcoming bands.

**8. Win on the streets.** Rather than make listeners come to your appearances and van stops, go to them. Here's one example: veteran Seattle morning host Bob Rivers, now with KZOK/Seattle, developed a tremendous campaign called Meet Every Listener. He asked listeners to send him an invitation to visit their office. Then he showed up with swag, doughnuts and client giveaways. Sometimes he met four guys in a machine shop—or 500 people at Microsoft. He took pictures with everyone, even people who weren't fans. He recorded the group doing a station ID and played it on-air, making the listeners feel like stars. And all those letters became leads for the sales department.

**9. Rethink your slogan.** Google is one of America's top brands, yet it doesn't have a slogan. Same with Apple, Starbucks and dozens of other top brands. No slogan. The best tag lines are benefit-driven, genuine and often whimsical like WaMu's "We don't nickel-and-dime you." Stations love slogans, especially those contrived in focus groups. Does "Today's hits and yesterday's favorites" really differentiate your station from others? Or does it slide by listeners like "whiter whites" and "We won't be undersold"? Ask yourself, Is your station's slogan relevant anymore? And do you even need one?

**10. Create appointment listening.** TV has mastered the art of promoting benchmark shows and driving them into our psyche. Tuesdays and Wednesdays at 8 p.m. means "American Idol" on Fox. Want to create true appointment listening? Start by renaming well-worn features. Call your request hour "Show Us Your Hits." The rate-a-record show becomes "Smash or Trash." Your countdown feature might be "Rack 'Em & Stack 'Em." Then, produce promos with the anticipation of a movie trailer. **R&R**

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