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RADIO PROGRAMMING

Tactics and Strategy

ERIC G. NORBERG

Radio Programming: Tactics and Strategy

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To my wife, friend, assistant, and partner,
Jane Kenney-Norberg

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Preface

As a student, teacher, writer, and, especially, practitioner of radio from 1960 to the present, I've read many books on modern radio programming. Many have seemed interesting and well written, but to date every book I've read has presented techniques of programming radio stations that amount to "how I do it." Many of the points made are useful and will work when applied, but generally they must be applied as the author dictates in order to work.

My purpose in writing this book is to present the principles by which modern radio programming is constructed. Although I do give examples to clarify points, generally speaking I'm dealing with underlying principles only, and I encourage you to find your own unique approach using these principles. For programmers who are not yet confident enough in their skills to program contrary to the way that everybody else is doing it, these principles will help you understand why the stations you are copying do succeed. It will also help you grasp which of their techniques might not be useful for you to use and which may be relevant to your own market situation.

Radio's role in our culture is unique, and unless the fundamentals of what make it so are explored and understood, we cannot succeed with it in the future. This, then, is the first radio programming handbook I'm aware of that actually deals with radio programming tactics—a complete guide to the strategies underlying the creation of the magic that allows radio to be the most powerful medium of communication ever invented.

Two factors combine to create radio's power. The first is that radio can be "consumed" while the listener is doing something else. All other forms of mass communication require the consumer's focused attention before communication can occur. Radio has evolved into a personal companion—a soundtrack accompaniment to our lives—as a result of this unique characteristic.

The second trait of radio that contributes to its power is that the technology by which it reaches the listener is uniquely invisible. When we read, we absorb the author's thoughts, but we are still aware that we are scanning symbols on a page. When we watch television or a movie, we can get lost in a good story or follow a well-articulated

thought, but we are never unaware that we are watching a reproduction on a screen. In each case, the means of communication itself forms a subtle barrier between us and the author or participants. When we listen to radio, however, the original voice, the music as it was created, reaches us through transparent technology. We do not hear the "sound" of the loudspeaker other than as pure sound. This allows us to respond in a more fundamentally personal way to what we hear than is possible with any other form of communication, in all of which the medium itself always becomes part of the message.

Further amplifying radio's power is something called the "transactional analysis principle." I once read a best-selling book about this called *Born to Win*. To summarize the essence of it for our discussion, I can distill it to this: People respond to us as we present ourselves to them. People react to us in the same way we act toward them. This is true in any context, but in radio this principle is uniquely effective because when others see us, part of the way we present ourselves to them includes such irrelevancies as what we look like, what we've chosen to wear, an unnoticed food stain on our sleeve, and the complexities of body language. In radio, all of these are absent, and all that's left of us is our voice. Through training, practice, and attitude, we are able to control fully the way our voice touches listeners. In radio, the rapport between us and our listeners can be complete—and intense.

A number of years ago, in a *TV Guide* article, a university professor said that two-thirds of all spoken communication is nonverbal. At first, I rejected this idea because it seemed to suggest that television is much more effective at communicating than radio, which I knew to be untrue. (Actually, the reverse is the case.) However, after a little thought, I realized what the man really meant, and I had to agree with him. His point was that 70 percent of all communication is other than simply the words spoken, and that is true. The way we say them, the attitude we project, is what really communicates what the words are saying. Because of the transparency of the medium, radio can communicate in this way far better than all other media.

When we speak on the radio, we are speaking intimately to just one person. If we want that person to relate to us, to care who he or she is listening to, to pay attention to what we say, and to act on it, we must drop our own personal defenses and relate to our listener as we would to a close friend. Personality, in radio, consists of no

more than this, and over the years, I have come to understand that everybody is capable of being a personality. The tough part for many people is realizing that—whatever their own "secret demons"—they are nonetheless just like everyone else, and they are likable people. Therefore, we must let the listener experience us as we really are.

The human being, a live person, is the essence of radio, and this will be as true in the future as it is today and has always been. Television is evolving in interesting ways as the computer comes closer to merging with it. As the television audience fragments, it becomes harder for local stations to make money in the expensive business of TV. Direct broadcast satellite and cable-delivered systems create more and more nationwide cable networks to respond to the need for low-cost-per-viewer programming.

For radio, though, the essence remains the relatable (local) person on the air, and this requires no extraordinary costs. As TV becomes more and more "wired in," radio—the truly wireless, portable companion—has, if anything, an even brighter future than its remarkable past.

Radio must play to its strengths to realize this future. In the years to come, there will be more and more direct-from-satellite and cable-delivered radio services, and there will be more audio services consisting of music without voice. Radio, in the sense addressed in this book, will survive and prosper only by retaining its permanent advantages. It must avoid, as much as possible, full automation and satellite-delivered programming, both of which tend to lower this lucrative kind of localized radio to the glossy impersonality of TV and other media.

After all, what's the real difference to the listener between a satellite-delivered format coming from a local station and the same format coming straight from a direct-broadcast satellite? Mostly, just local commercials and perhaps a little wire-service news. That's not a very meaningful difference. The satellite format providers are well positioned to cut the local stations that relay their programs right out of the loop when the time seems right.

Thus there are two elements that radio stations must retain if they are to survive and prosper—and these are the elements that listeners value most in radio anyway: localism and human contact. We'll talk more about these as we travel together through this book.

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The Basic Principles of Radio Programming

The Station versus the Programs

From the twenties to the mid-fifties, radio was a program-oriented medium. Listeners tuned in programs, and which station (or even which network) broadcast them was relatively unimportant. Television snatched away this function in the fifties, and at first, amid steep audience declines, it appeared that radio—the broadcast medium that didn't have pictures—had been made irrelevant by video. The funeral was premature.

The first step toward modern format-oriented radio occurred in Omaha, Nebraska. According to legend, Todd Storz was hunting for something profitable to do with his daytime radio station, KOWH. He was talking it over with colleague Bill Stewart in a bar when they noticed that customers played the same songs over and over again on the bar's jukebox. Storz and Stewart reasoned that if they limited the station's music playlist to the songs that drew the most plays in jukeboxes and played them repeatedly, KOWH would draw an audience. It did. The daytime-only station rapidly drew audience shares of well over 50 percent.

Cut to Dallas, Texas. Gordon McLendon had already had some real success in radio. He had formed the national Liberty Network to broadcast baseball "games of the week," but the major-league baseball

teams refused to grant him the rights to broadcast their games. He solved this problem by arranging to get pitch-by-pitch, play-by-play telegraph reports on selected games from an observer posted in the stands. From these reports, he re-created the games in his Texas studio, using sound effects and his own sense of drama. Most listeners never realized that "the old Scotchman" who brought them the games was neither old nor present at any of the games.

The Liberty Network was history by the mid-fifties, and McLendon by then was in charge of KLIF in Dallas, a minor independent AM radio station owned by his father. He was intrigued by reports of what KOWH was doing in Omaha, and after checking it out, he installed his version at KLIF. Thus Top 40 was born—as was all modern radio formatting. Legendary stations—WABC, WLS, WQAM, WINS, KOMA, KFWB, KRLA, WMGM, CKLW, KYA, KFRC, WCFL, KJR, KHJ, WMCA, and many others—refined it.

What McLendon added to the Storz-Stewart concept was a sense of showmanship and the understanding that to succeed, the new Top 40 format had to define the cutting edge of the youth popular culture. Young people have always defined the forward edge of the pop culture; this was as true back in the big-band era as it is today. Adults eventually adopt what started out as an unsettling youth phenomenon (in music, fashion, consumer culture, everything), whereupon the young people move on, always seeking to define themselves in ways that differentiate them not only from their parents, but also from the generation that immediately preceded them. Top 40 radio thus needed to concentrate on the current hits, played over and over, because the current hits—established by sales and requests—define the group that defines itself by the music, which is the teens, the most active group buying hit records and calling request lines. It is true that only the real "activists" of the teen culture are doing most of the buying and requesting, but the youth culture is created by those activists, so it is quite legitimate to use that data to program a Top 40 station.

Top 40 tends to draw large adult audiences for two reasons. First, many of those adults are parents of the teens (or subteens) who turn the station on. Second, many adults like to feel that they are still in tune with the youth culture. Because many of those buying "spins" on the Omaha jukeboxes were adults, they too valued the ease and comfort of getting what they wanted when they wanted it. So the basic "format radio" principle was applicable, with modifications, to adults

too—and McLendon was smart enough to realize that, although it was not until 1959 that competitive circumstances led him to develop format radio in other directions—first at KABL, Oakland-San Francisco, where he developed the successful package with harps and poetry for the Beautiful Music format; and later in Los Angeles via XETRA, Tijuana, Mexico, with the first solidly successful All-News format.

The show business element that McLendon brought to format radio included the development of high-profile personalities to whom the core audience could relate and the use of stylized format elements, such as outrageous stunts and intriguing on-air contests. His imaginative promotions included running commercials for imaginary services, to tweak the listeners! Courtesy of Dave Verdery at KBIG in Los Angeles, who worked for McLendon, here's a portion of a memo by Gordon about this unusual promotional idea:

> *Along with station promos,* exotics *are your major cause of listener talk. These should be scheduled at least once every three hours throughout the day. The best exotics seem to be those which are completely incongruous with the idea, i.e., advertising the Brooklyn Ferry in San Francisco. Good sources for exotics are distant areas, selling products not normally sold in this area, advertising something completely foreign to the general thought, etc. All exotics should be played perfectly straight; they should never be done live. All should be perfectly produced and recorded. They have a tendency to annoy many people and you will receive quite a few complaints. Ignore them. Exotic commercials are almost the backbone of this type of operation. It is believed they are second only to the actual music policy of KABL's success.*

Many of those who listened to KLIF and its many imitators in the late fifties and early sixties remember the stations as rock-and-roll radio. However, the published Top 40 playlists show that many of the records played were not rock and roll at all. Some songs were ballads from artists like Frank Sinatra, Tony Bennett, Doris Day, and Rosemary Clooney. Bennett's "I Left My Heart in San Francisco" was a Top 40 hit in the fall of 1962.

There are always hit records that originate in older pop styles but that nonetheless appeal to the young and are legitimately part of the cutting edge of the pop culture. Hit radio stations in later decades all too often forgot that. They arbitrarily rejected any then-current pop hit records not seen as mainstream youth records, which reduced their

station's appeal to all components of their audience. The only justification for the wide variety that has characterized successful Top 40 radio is that all these records are united by being current hits. That free-ranging variety has always been the essence of Top 40's wide demographic appeal.

To Gordon McLendon, then, we must award credit for originating much of what radio became in the latter half of the twentieth century. Stations learned that attracting audiences begins with consistency. These principles have been refined over the years by such outstanding programmers and consultants as Mike Joseph, Bill Gavin, Paul Drew, Kent Burkhart, Lee Abrams, Bill Stewart, George Burns, Rick Sklar, and many others. Once radio had been reinvented as an ongoing, lifestyle-oriented audio accompaniment, it became station-oriented instead of program-oriented. People today choose stations to listen to based on their own perceptions of what kind of service the station will offer, rather than on any specific program.

There is one exception to this, though. Play-by-play sports coverage is perceived as a program. As I have had plenty of opportunity to observe and research in my career, listeners will tune to whatever station they must to hear that "program." Afterward, they return to the stations to which they usually listen. This creates unforeseen problems for stations that use sports to draw casual listeners whom they hope to convert to regular listeners. This is discussed in more detail in the next chapter.

The Importance of Consistency

Today, successful stations devote themselves consistently to one type of programming. This programming generally consists of a mixture of compatible elements, such as newscasts, commercials, and air personalities. The principle of consistency can be refined as follows: Successful programming consists of fulfilling listener expectations, and listener expectations are based mostly on what the station has done in the past. This refinement makes clear what a programmer must do to maximize the success of a radio station. A station must be consistent with what it has done in the past to reinforce listener expectations.

To succeed as a program director, you must be able to hear your station, and radio in general, from the perspective of the listener. You'll have to get into the listener's head—a listener who is much less preoccupied with radio than you are—to understand how the audience actually perceives your station and the competition.

If your station matches listener expectations when they tune in, they feel rewarded, and the behavior of tuning in your station more often and listening longer is reinforced. If your station fails to match listener expectations, the audience's perception of your station is weakened, and they will tune in less often and listen for shorter intervals each time.

What about ratings, which are discussed in much greater depth in Chapter 8? When a station does not meet listener expectations, the weekly cumulative audience will hold up quite well for a considerable period of time, as listeners tune in from time to time, hoping that the station will again be as they expect it to be. However, the average quarter hour share, which is based on the average listening span, will show a downward trend. In this case, all that's necessary is to realign the station to listener expectations. In many cases, though, station management reacts by changing the format in the hope of building a bigger but different audience for a new service—thus destroying the expectations of the existing audience altogether. Building a new audience is almost always harder than "fixing" an existing station that already has an established audience.

In the context of listener expectations, exactly what a station is doing at any given instant is almost irrelevant to the established image of the station. This point hit me one day when one of my on-air personalities at KEX in Portland, Oregon, where I was the program director at the time, stopped by my office with an observation that puzzled him. He had been at a laundromat and noticed that the radio on the shelf there was not tuned to Adult Contemporary KEX as it usually was, but instead had been turned to Top 40 KGW. As he proceeded with his laundry, the manager of the laundry popped out of her office, looked around suspiciously, asked who had changed the radio, and retuned the receiver to KEX. Then she visibly relaxed and went back into her office. What puzzled the deejay was that, at that moment, both stations were playing the same song. The manager's relief at retuning her favorite station could not have been based on the

music that the two stations were actually broadcasting when she changed the station. Actually, the manager's rejection of KGW and her preference for KEX were based on her perception of what each station represented—and what sort of music she expected to hear next on each. What a station is playing right now can be almost irrelevant to the listener's image, and thus expectations, of the station.

There is another dimension to listener expectations—one that probably played a major part in the laundry manager's reaction. As noted earlier, with modern formatting, radio became a lifestyle medium. As a result, listeners choose their favorite station at least partly because it seems to reflect them—their tastes, their values, their very selves. It's a "cultural mirror" for them, in that respect—a touchstone by which they define themselves and with which they keep in touch with the elements of their culture.

This special role of radio is most obvious in ethnic broadcasting, but it's important for all listener segments, which is why demographics—the age groups into which ratings are customarily divided—are quite inadequate to define radio audiences. Adult contemporary pop music stations, oldies stations, country music stations, classic rock stations, and jazz stations generally compete for the same demographics, but they reach very different audiences in terms of lifestyle.

The role of radio as a cultural mirror motivates listeners to use a station as a "soundtrack" for their lives, and it explains why people get so enraged when "their station" changes format. After all, it's a bit like looking into the mirror and seeing a stranger looking back at you. A format change seems to be a rejection of the listener's values—and even his or her identity. Radio people sometimes underestimate the important role our stations play in people's lives. Just answer the phones after a format change!

Radio formatting once was a much simpler job than it is now; even big markets had relatively few radio stations with significant audiences, and all were on the AM band. (FM stations were not even included in most ratings until the mid-sixties; measurable FM audiences were usually lumped into the "miscellaneous" category until then, except by the Hooper Rating service.) By the eighties, when FM stations commonly drew audiences larger than the AM stations did, there was such a large choice of stations in most areas that niche programming became the rule, and most AM and FM stations began catering to small segments of the available audience.