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**RULES**

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**OF THE**

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**RADIO**

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**RATINGS**

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**GAME**

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by Robert E. Balon

National Association of Broadcasters

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**THE RULES OF THE RATINGS GAME**

**By**

**Robert E. Balon  
The Benchmark Company**



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## INTRODUCTION

In the days before man invented a written language and paper to write thoughts on, all the wisdom of the time was passed down verbally from generation to generation. In some ways, the radio industry today is similar. Very little of our wisdom is written. Instead, we have an oral tradition of learning from others we have worked with or met during our careers. In Rules of the Radio Ratings Game, Rob Balon has taken much of the conventional wisdom of winning radio backed up with seven years of research for over 300 radio stations, and adds some new twists of his own. Rules of the Radio Ratings Game is a book everyone at your station should read because there is something in it for each person. Know the rules of the game and you will succeed.

Ed Cohen, Manager of Audience Measurement and Policy Research  
National Association of Broadcasters  
Washington, DC





## PREFACE

Successful broadcasters have long realized that there are critical elements which must be isolated and controlled in order to win at the ratings game. We've drawn on seven years of research into every radio format, as well as our own investigations into the diarykeeping process, to draw together these elements into a manageable set of rules. We believe that if you follow these rules, you'll be less subject to the "unknowns" of the rating process, and more likely to achieve demographic consistency in your target audience.

The rules are meant to embellish the overall effect of good-sounding radio, but not to replace it. In other words, your station must sound its very best to derive maximum benefit from the rules.

I wish to acknowledge the able assistance of Ms. Paige Blount and Ms. Renee Schmookler in the preparation of this manuscript. They worked under conditions that were less than idyllic, as is often the case when deadline crunches are imminent.

Finally, I wish to dedicate this book to the three people that serve as a welcome reminder that there is life beyond radio. To my wife, Marge, and our daughters, Jennifer and Lauren, I am indebted to all of you for being there.

R. B.  
April 1988



## RULE ONE

### DON'T OVERESTIMATE THE PRODUCT KNOWLEDGE OF YOUR AUDIENCE

Those of us who practice the art and business of owning and managing radio stations can live in a sort of Pollyanna world. In the trenches, there is a business that is dictated by the brutal and cold reality of rating points and market shares. Yet we often find ourselves pleasantly drawn away from that reality by the artistic aspects of our business. We seldom have to really get our hands dirty in the ratings process; (except for the dreaded arrival of the quarterly, biannual or annual book). Rather, we prefer to move through an incestuous fantasy world of radio which reinforces the worst kinds of myopia and tunnel vision. We talk only to our peers. Our frame of reference is necessarily limited. We exist in such close quarters with those who share the same emotional involvement in the medium that we do that it can lead to the notion that listeners care about and listen to radio much the same as we do. Nothing could be further from the truth.

Many radio listeners are unassuming about their listening. It is not a top priority in their lives and subsequently, they spend little time thinking about the source from which all our careers emanate: the **medium**. In short, they know precious little about radio! Unfortunately most practitioners of radio rarely encounter that average listener. The listeners we most often see are easy to identify: they attend remotes, they come to our promotions, they call us on the phones, they present themselves at the door of the radio station looking longingly up at the call letters. They bring trinkets and gifts for the disc jockeys. They are visible! It is extremely easy to see these individuals as the sum total of your target audience. It's easier still to take their feedback and project it when you fine-tune your radio station. Most radio

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personalities encounter few listeners in their careers other than these individuals. This kind of exposure can tend to cloud the realities of listening in a marketplace and can often affect virtually everyone at a radio station.

The fallacy of the active or "superlistener" is that by all popular accounts, they represent no more than one percent of your total radio audience. Every time the phone rings at the radio station, there are 99 other people out there who are never going to pick up the phone and call in. Thus, it's critical that station personnel realize that the one percent should be viewed with caution and taken with a grain of salt. These people ought not to be ignored, but the typical station employee must realize that they represent only a microcosm of the total audience. Unfortunately, they are the most active of your listeners. If you're not careful you can paint a rather compelling portrait of your total audience based on the feedback from this most vocal but hardly representative minority.

## **What Most Listeners Really Know About Your Station**

In the course of conducting market research for over 300 radio stations in the past seven years, we've come to realize that there are many commonalities among radio listeners. First and foremost, they really don't care that much about radio. Their lives do not revolve around it. Consider a light bulb analogy. When is the last time you walked into a room, turned on the light, enjoyed the reflected glow of the bulb and yet paid any attention to its make or manufacturer? About the only time you noticed the make of the light bulb was when it burned out and you had to replace it. Radio listeners are much the same. They respond to our commercials and listen to

## **Rule One: Don't Overestimate The Product Knowledge Of Your Audience**

our product (indeed if they didn't, we would all be out of business) but they pay very little attention to the source of that product -- the radio station. Yet because of the way our ratings system is structured, it is imperative that each listener have a rather clear idea about what each radio station offers and what the call letters are.

In collecting listeners' top-of-mind information about radio stations, the list of verbatim comments that indicate their shocking lack of familiarity with radio stations could take up pages. We'll share just a few different types of comments with you here that are indicative of the average radio listener's mindset. For example, when asked to describe their favorite stations, radio listeners around the country often respond as follows:

*"Well, I have my buttons set and I punch back and forth so I don't really know the names of any of the stations."*

*"Oh, I listen to 98, 101, 93 they all sound alike to me."*

*"I listen to that station in the middle; you know, the one under the D."*

*"Oh, I like the station with the funny guy; you know, K-something. I must listen eight hours a day, but I just don't know the name."*

*"I like the rock station because they play rock music; I don't know the call letters."*

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*"Sure I like that station WBPE because they play great rock-n-roll" (WBPE is actually a news/talk station in the market. The listener completely misheard the call letters.)*

These types of comments by listeners are not the exception, they are the rule. They are typical product statements made by product users who care only marginally about the end result product and not at all about the origination of that end result.

Researchers also ask listeners for their top-of-mind awareness of radio stations. Since both rating services emphasize top-of-mind awareness, it's a critical question for your target listener. Again, the nature of many responses are most sobering:

*"Let's see, the first thing that comes to mind about WBPE is -- well -- they're good."*

*"WBPE? Uh, they play the same song every five minutes."*

*"WBPE? Yeah, I listen, but I can't think of a thing."*

*"WBPE? Never heard of the station."*

The key argument for top-of-mind awareness in radio is a simple one: the more a

## **Rule One: Don't Overestimate The Product Knowledge Of Your Audience**

listener can tell you about a radio station, the greater the likelihood that he or she will write it down in a diary or mention it in a telephone recall interview.

The comments exhibited above are very typical of listener comments about stations that don't do well in the ratings. An examination of each of the statements will bear that out.

- o Usually, when your core listeners say "good," they can back it up with very specific comments but listeners who say the station is "good" generally say that because they don't have enough product knowledge to talk **specifically** about the station. "Good" becomes a generic catch-all for the unaware listener. If your station's research reveals that your **only** dominant top-of-mind attribute is "good," then you may be in potential ratings trouble. Listeners need to be able to talk about **other** benchmarks your station has such as news, personalities, or the style of music. Simply getting your core listeners to say you're "good" isn't enough in the ratings game.
  
- o Encountering the perception that your station "plays the same song every five minutes" can be maddeningly frustrating to a program director. Many times in focus groups we have seen PDs want to jump through the one-way mirror and strangle the respondent who made that comment about his station. "For God's sake," the PD will reply (generally for the sake of the general manager) "I've got that record in a five-hour rotation!"

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The reason the listener makes a comment like that is because he or she is confused. Listening to four or five stations, the offending song may be on all of them, and for lack of knowledge, they attribute the "five minute" label to your station. It means that, at least for some listeners, your station hasn't done a good enough job of differentiating itself from the competition.

- If a significant number of listeners who listen to your station can't think of anything at all to say about it, you are on the verge of disaster. The radio ratings war is fought on the battlefield of unaided recall; that is, listeners' ability to remember things about your station that will help them recall listening to your station in a diary or telephone recall situation. When listeners simply don't have enough product knowledge to list any top-of-mind awareness for your station, it means that you're not going to get the reported listening you deserve. It may well be going to your better-marketed competitor.
- Complete lack of awareness is the broadcaster's mortal enemy in the ratings process. While no radio station can generate one hundred percent awareness in a market, there are acceptable levels of ignorance, which we'll discuss in Rule Two.

This is not to say that there are no radio listeners out there who aren't intimately familiar with what we do. Virtually everyone has a focus group story or two about the listener who came in armed with a stack of Billboard magazines and was able to converse in fine detail about how many times a particular radio station stops down in



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an hour. Without doubt, these few listeners are a distinct exception. The rule is that the average listener simply knows little about what you do. He or she may listen four, five or six hours a day and yet at the end of the week be unable to tell what call letters the station has or even what the single, greatest attribute of the radio station might be. The great damage that we create when we **overestimate** the typical listener's product knowledge about our radio station is that we prematurely assume that our smallest message is getting through. In our fantasy world of radio, we see a listener who hangs on every word that we say, who is familiar with our contests, promotions, and the smallest nuances of our programming. We see a listener who has a diary clutched in his or her hand as we sweep him through the quarter hour. We see a listener who really hears the difference in our station now that we have added another recurrent in mid-days. Indeed, in this fantasy world, we might even hear this conversation:

Scene: Breakfast - typical American household - two yuppies (attorneys) engaged in casual discussion.

**Woman:** *So what do you think of that new station, 96.5?*

**Man:** *Well, my main problem is that they stop down too many times an hour.*

**Woman:** *Yeah, if they stopped down less, they'd have an easier time with their guaranteed music pitch.*

**Man:** *And they have an annoying tendency to come out of the last stop set each hour with a power gold.*

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*Woman: Oh, I know what you mean. I think they've got entirely too many titles in their library ...*

Again, there is nothing in our research data either locally or nationally that suggests that there are enough "super listeners" out there to significantly impact any format or greatly benefit any radio station.

### **Why Listeners Don't Know More About Your Station**

There are four simple reasons why average radio listeners know precious little about your radio station or your competitors:

- a. **Radio is free.**
- b. **Most radio listening is incidental or coincidental.**
- c. **Retail products have a much higher possibility for brand loyalty.**
- d. **There is no real reason why any listener should know more about your radio station.**

#### **Radio is free.**

Once the initial set purchase has been made, listeners don't have to pay for radio programming. As they don't have to purchase time in increments or blocks when they listen to radio, most listeners have very little sense of how much time they spend with the product. There are no economic sanctions placed on the listening process, so there are also few if any risks. Consumer theory will tell you that as price decreases and the amount of perceived risk in a purchase decreases, so too does the consumer's overall knowledge of that product.

## **Rule One: Don't Overestimate The Product Knowledge Of Your Audience**

Consider the following scenario: It's Monday morning, you have breakfast, get into your car, and head for work. As is your custom, you turn on the radio and begin to scan around to find the station you want to listen to that morning. When you punch in the first station along with the digital readout, you get a neatly displayed graphic message addressing you by name and informing you that the first half hour of listening on your station of choice will cost you \$3.50. The message further asks you to dial in your encoded computer account number. Taken aback, you begin to search across the dial and get a similar message in each scenario. You find that stations, in half-hour increments, are charging anywhere from \$3.50 to \$5.50 or \$6.00 an hour. Two things occur here: first, the listener actually would have to become a more educated consumer. If he is going to have to pay \$6.00 for a half hour of radio listening, he is going to want the very best he can get for his money. Second, charging people to listen to the radio would undoubtedly inhibit dial zapping and punching around. Once people made a choice they would probably stick with it for a while.

Ironically, if American consumers had to pay for their radio programming, their product knowledge would probably increase greatly. But because the product is free and because they have no risk or economic involvement in the listening process, they can punch around to their hearts' content, dial zap for hours at a time (particularly in the in-car environment) and not be forced to pay attention to one station over the other. This is what most advertising agencies have failed to understand about radio as a medium. Many of them treat our business as if we sold sets! We don't though,

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and our listeners are not "consumers" in either the theoretical or practical sense of the word.

With the uncertainties of the radio rating process, many radio stations would probably benefit if set sales were the exclusive source of our revenue. If you wanted to listen to station A, you would simply go out and buy a set for station A. If you wanted to listen to station B, you could buy a set for station B. If you wanted to listen for more than an hour, you could buy a set with the quarter-hour band for an extra \$2.00, and so the possibilities go. While the suggestion may be light-hearted, the reality of a set-selling scenario would be most interesting. There would no longer be the nagging doubt that goes along with the release of each rating book (Am I getting credit for all the listeners that I actually have?). Very simply, if a sales manager wanted an accurate figure of sets sold broken out by demographics, he or she would simply wait for the sales figures to come in from all the stores, plug them into the computer and the readout would be unimpeachable.

But we don't sell sets and our listeners are far more likely to know more about the *BMW* they are going to purchase, that new set of golf clubs they've been eyeing, or even the nuances of *Hellman's* mayonnaise versus *Miracle Whip* because they must part with varying degrees of cash for each of the above. It is that very process of parting with one's hard-earned cash that differentiates a consumer on any level from the radio listener.

## **Rule One: Don't Overestimate The Product Knowledge Of Your Audience**

On a positive note: In the world of new products available to American consumers, most will never be tried because consumers tend to develop fairly high levels of brand loyalty. Radio stations as a whole don't exhibit the degree of brand loyalty that a lot of retail products do and because of the fact that there is virtually no economic risk in sampling a radio station, radio listeners do much more casual "shopping around" than when they put on a retail shopping hat. This bodes well for new radio stations in particular who are almost assured of some sampling while the majority of "new" products released in America each year fail because they can't break through the brand identification/need cycle of consumption.

**Most radio listening is incidental or coincidental.**

Another reason why people don't know more about your radio station is that radio simply doesn't occupy the role that it did in the American household in the 1930s and 1940s. The scenario then was an enviable one by today's listening standards with the entire household sitting in rapt silence listening to the latest adventures of *The Lone Ranger* or the comedy of Fred Allen or Jack Benny. Those were the days when radio was truly a consuming phenomenon.

After World War II, radio listening became much more decentralized. Suddenly the radio was available in many more locations than it had ever been. As the nature of radio programs changed from dramatic to music formats, so did the nature of listening. As radio programming evolved, listening to radio ceased to become a primary activity (as watching TV was to become) and became more of a secondary activity. With so many different listening locations to choose from, listeners had a

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proportionately more difficult time remembering the various environments in which listening occurred. Ironically, the portability of radio, always a strong point, also became a weakness from an audience measurement standpoint. It made the entire process more difficult while inhibiting the acceptance of any electronic measurement systems for radio.

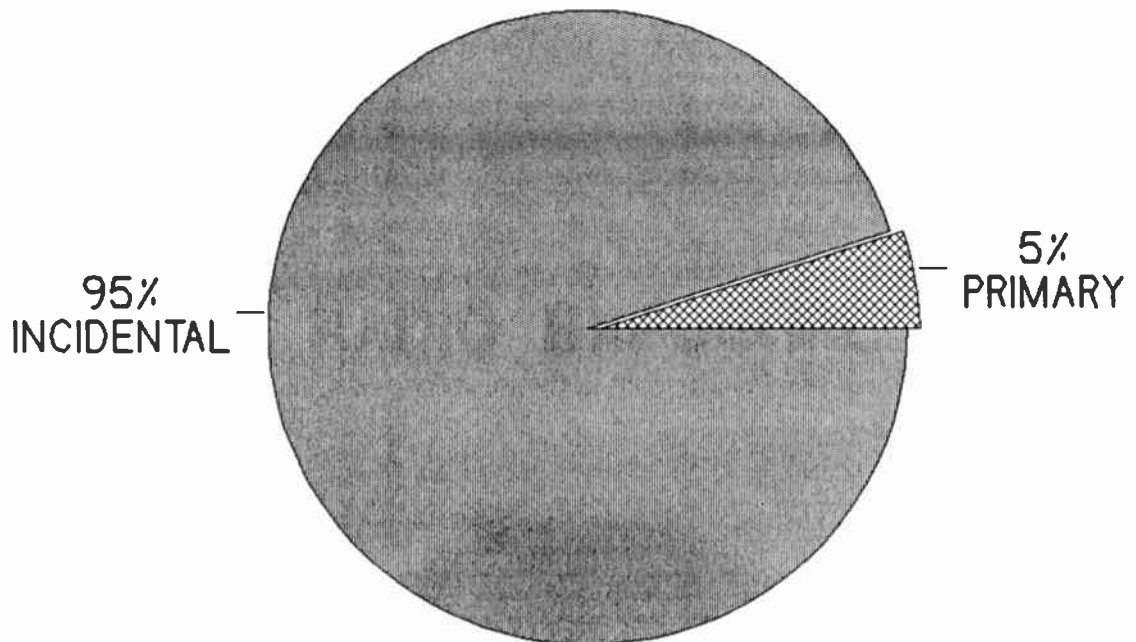
Chart 1 graphically represents how little time spent listening to radio occurs as a primary activity. We see radio listening in the following terms: five percent of the listening is primary, (i.e., it is the main event within which the person is involved like sitting down to listen to a baseball game) and ninety-five percent of that listening is incidental to some other primary lifestyle event.

Radio, which has often been categorized as "the portable friend," is the perfect accompaniment to many daily activities. Chart 2 graphically represents a number of different "primary activities" in American lifestyles. It is critically important for radio broadcasters to understand more about the relationship of radio with primary lifestyle activities. The reason for this is because people rarely recall listening to radio based around what a particular station does at a particular point in time. Being creatures of habit, they tend to recall radio listening based around what they normally do. So, it behooves the individual station to know as much as possible about the primary activities and lifestyles of its listeners.

**Rule One: Don't Overestimate The Product Knowledge Of Your Audience**

**CHART 1**

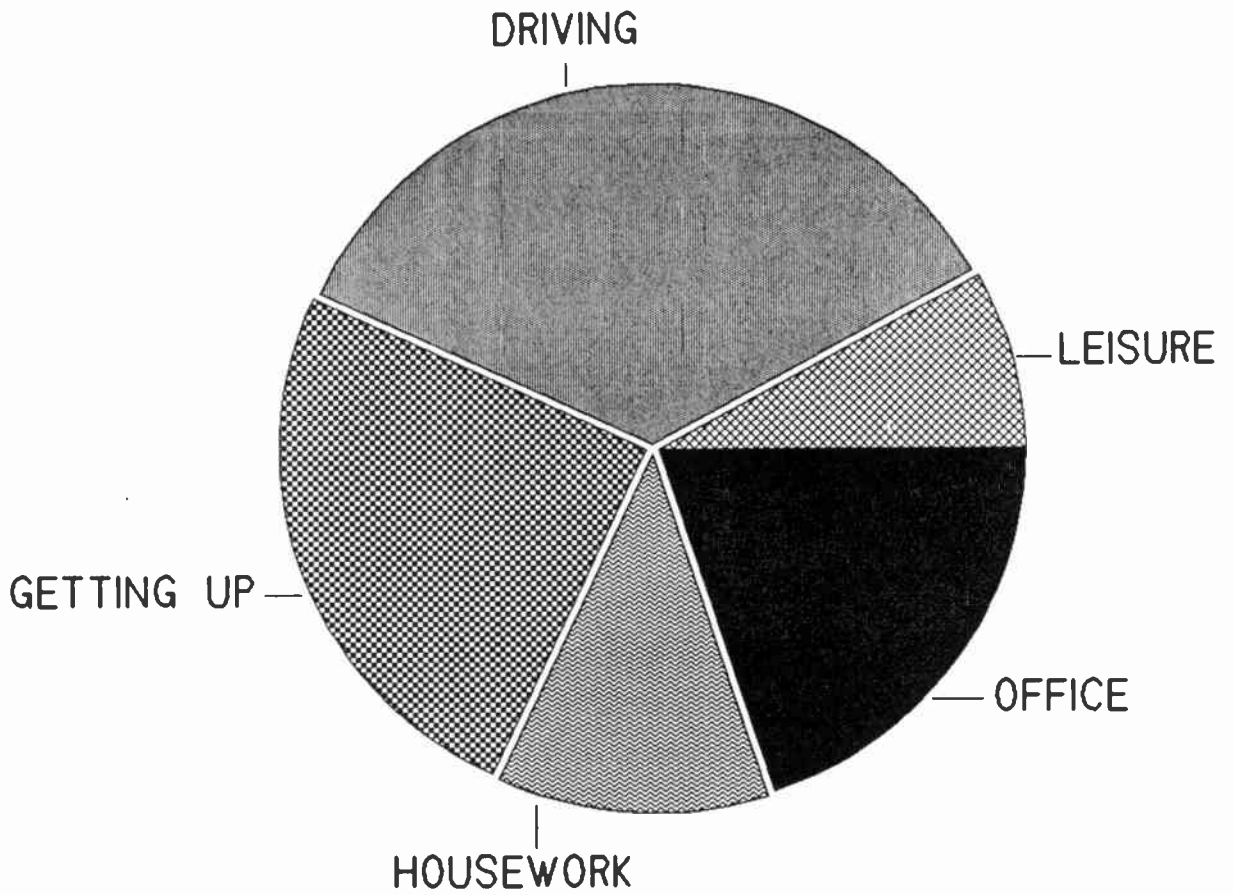
**RADIO EXPOSURE**



**Source: The Benchmark Company**

CHART 2.

PRIMARY ACTIVITIES



Source: The Benchmark Company



## **Rule One: Don't Overestimate The Product Knowledge Of Your Audience**

For example, when asked to recall what he had listened to that past week, a typical focus group respondent made the following comment:

*"Well let's see, every Monday morning I get up at 6:30 a.m. and get breakfast for my teenagers while my wife gets the little ones ready for pre-school. While I'm making breakfast, I almost always listen to the "John Elliott Wake-up Show," then when I drive the kids to school, which usually is about from 7:30 to 8:00, I pretty much have on the same station. Then when I drive to work, when I get to spend some time on myself, I tune in one of the easy listening stations."*

This kind of response is fairly typical of a listener who, when asked to go back and remember what he had listened to on the radio, recalls first what he did, and secondarily what radio station he listened to.

Here is an interesting experiment you can try at your own radio station. At your next sales or production meeting, ask the people involved to go back four or five days and remember what they had for lunch on that particular day (perish the thought that we would ask them anything so difficult as to actually recall radio listening). Most people, unless they are on some arcane diet which demands that they eat lentil soup each day at noon, will stare at you with a blank face and shrug their shoulders. Then, when you press the point, they will try to reconstruct what they had for lunch by doing the same type of thing a diarykeeper might do. They will try to determine the environment that they were in, who they were with, where they were, what they were doing, and ultimately what they had for lunch. The point that

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we can make here is that lunch is reasonably important! It represents a treasured "lifestyle moment" for most workers and is considerably higher on the scale than what station A is playing at that particular point and time.

The analogy follows then that if most people have a hard time remembering what they had for lunch four or five days ago, one could suspect that they would have an equally difficult if not much more difficult time recalling accurately what they listened to on the radio over that same time span. This is why it is so critical to get in touch with your listeners' lifestyles and find out the types of things that they are involved in. The more that you understand about how they live their lives and the rituals that they create for themselves throughout the day, the better you will be able to market your radio station to that target group of listeners.

### **Retail products have a much higher possibility for brand loyalty.**

Many broadcasters are often frustrated to find that they can't market radio stations the way that retailers market their products. As we discussed, the primary reason is because there is no purchase involved in the radio consumption process. A retailer can have a "sale," something a broadcaster can't do, and yet broadcasters would kill for the type of brand loyalty that a number of retail products command among American consumers. While no precise figure is available, varying estimates have calculated that in retail terms, the "exclusive cume" of *Campbell's Soup* is 40 percent. That is, four out of ten American soup consumers have never tried a product other than *Campbell's Soup*. What radio station around the country can boast of a 40

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percent exclusive come? How many stations in the top 100 markets can even approach that number?

Back in the 1930s, a number of ad agencies conducted a study that isolated 50 brand leaders in different retail product categories. That study was replicated 50 years later in the mid-1980s and the results were astonishing. Out of 50 brand leaders that had been identified in the earlier survey, 47 of the 50 were still brand leaders! The world of retail is replete with lasting and consistent product images. We know that things go better with *Coke* and that the *Pillsbury Dough Boy* make it permissible to bake your next loaf of bread out of a cardboard carton. We know that *Mr. Clean's* head invokes a shiny, crystal edge to that long lasting product. We've seen the rise and fall of *Betty Crocker's* hemlines, and the style of her hair changed from time to time, but the bottom line is that the image and the product have benefited from years of association.

Radio practitioners could take a lesson from their retail colleagues in terms of creating consistency of images. Unfortunately, the watchword in the radio industry, as far as the listener is concerned, is not consistency; rather, it is change ... on an almost daily basis. We change the call letters, we change the dial positions, we change the music, we change the personalities, we change the billboards, we change the TV spots, we change image campaigns, we change positioning lines, and so it goes. Most radio people would be hard pressed to think back ten years, let alone fifty, and pick out more than a handful of radio stations that have maintained an overall image and market leadership position. For every *KDKA*, *KMOX*, *WCCO*, and *WBZ*, there are

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hundreds of radio stations that have come and gone in the seeming wink of an eye. While it is true that successful stations must evolve over a period of time, the rapid change that most stations in most markets constantly go through is unsettling to the listener and throws up a number of obstacles to listener brand loyalty. In the radio business, where advanced planning usually means who you're going to have lunch with next Friday, we could all do well to observe the leading stations in our industry that are classic examples of consistency and aggressive marketing. Most of them have the following characteristics in common:

- o highly regarded and visible personalities
- o long term consistency of format
- o community involvement with detailed and very aggressive marketing and promotion
- o dominance in one product area; e.g., perceived as playing the most music

These are the types of stations we all envy and yet most of us don't even come close to begin to emulate. We are afraid that we will "burnout" our marketing messages if listeners hear them for too long a time. Nothing can be further from the truth. Most radio stations don't even begin to approach the amount of time necessary to create the serious, concrete and lasting images that so many retailers have established.

## **Rule One: Don't Overestimate The Product Knowledge Of Your Audience**

There is no real reason why any listener should know more about your radio station. Use the old advertising cliché, "what's in it for me?" Why should listeners know more about your station? What vested interest do they have in knowing what you do other than in turning the radio on and off and enjoying whatever it is they come to the radio for. Aside from the fanatical one percent and the few "super listeners" already discussed, average listeners have nothing to gain from accumulating any detailed knowledge of what you do, your call letters, dial positions, or personalities.

### **Common Examples of What Happens When A Radio Station Overestimates Listeners Product Knowledge.**

#### **Pulling a Contest or Promo Before its Time.**

One of the classic examples of overestimating the product knowledge of your average listener is what generally occurs at a station when members of the staff feel a promotion has "burned-out." Radio people are in an environment where they listen to radio all day and they tire of repetition very quickly. Then too, the morning or afternoon jock may report to the PD that the phones are getting really negative on this promotion. That makes everybody nervous and, in many cases, the promotion or contest is pulled before it has lived its natural life.

The time that everybody at the radio station is reaching the point of nausea regarding the promotion or contest and about the time the phone lines are lighting up with callers telling you how sick they are of hearing it, is about when that promotion or contest is making an impact on the **average** listener. Once you factor out the one

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percent and the "super listeners," it takes far longer for the information you are attempting to convey to reach people in a meaningful way, i.e., to impact on their ability to remember listening to your station.

Virtually anyone who has worked at a radio station during a promotion or a contest can tell war stories of how their phones lit up when their major competitor was running its big contest. Conversely, when your station runs a contest, think of the other radio station switchboards lighting up, as listeners, in a frenzied attempt to win the prize, completely misread the station that's giving it away.

The message here is simple: resist the temptation to dump things too quickly because your staff and a microcosm of your audience feel that it's burned-out. The word "burnout" really has no place in the vernacular of the aggressive radio marketer because that individual knows you can never give the call letters enough and you can never pound home the message enough times. When radio people do a contest, they assume they are the only ones in the world who are doing a contest. They forget the fact that *Burger King*, *Eastern Airlines*, *McDonalds*, and *Foto-Mat* are all doing contests. There are an infinite number of places for listeners to win. This is another example of that extreme brand of radio tunnel vision discussed earlier leads many broadcasters to make the mistake of thinking their contest is the one that is unique and will be remembered and instantly identified by the listener. Don't assume for a second the listeners who call are necessarily fans of your radio station. Don't assume they have any idea whatsoever of what you do other than the fact that they heard they could win some money on your radio station.

## **Rule One: Don't Overestimate The Product Knowledge Of Your Audience**

**Avoid letting telephone callers program your radio station.**

Ask any radio personality what he or she finds most frustrating about the industry and the majority will probably tell you it's the lack of feedback from the listener. All talent wants reassurance. How am I doing? How am I being perceived? Is anybody out there listening? So it is not surprising that air personalities tend to put great emphasis on the people who do call in. That is their immediate link with the listener and whether it is an appropriate one is really a moot point. The personality's ego demands that somebody out there be listening. The incoming call --- good, bad, or indifferent -- is the only indication most talent gets that there is a world out there. As a result, too many air personalities gauge success or failure by the number of calls they get per shift.

While we believe that only 1 out of 100 listeners picks up the phone and calls the station, intuition and emotion may make us pay far more attention to those people than we should. The key rule here is to avoid becoming unduly influenced by the person who calls up a radio station. Avoid trying to paint a portrait of this individual as being much more representative of a group of listeners than he or she actually is. The key problem with listeners who call you up is that they are a **self-selecting sample**. They select you -- you do not sample or select them. Therefore, there is no randomness in the process. You can't make any scientific judgments about those people as a group or a subgroup.

Our research has also indicated that people who call radio stations frequently are not necessarily people who would fill out a diary on a consistent basis. Diaries are flat,

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one-dimensional, unexciting things. Talking on the phone to someone at the radio station, on the other hand, can offer a whole different range of more exciting and immediate possibilities.

One of the mistakes that radio stations frequently make is drawing samples for auditorium music tests from the telephone numbers generated from people who call the station or enter contests on the radio station. They do this on the erroneous assumption that these people are the most active listeners of the radio station and will thereby provide an accurate profile of diarykeepers. We respectfully disagree with that. While some diarykeepers may indeed be in the group that tries to enter, there is nothing that definitely suggests that they will be disproportionately represented in it. Let's face it. First and foremost, listeners enter contests because they want to win, not because they are zealously loyal to your station.

**"We're on in all the stores."**

This has always been a favorite example of graphic overestimation of both listener and retailer product knowledge. There is only one type of person who goes into stores specifically for the purpose of listening to the radio: the radio person. In all the stores that you have been to in your life, have you ever seen real people cocking their ears to catch the latest tune coming out over the store's loudspeakers and having lengthy discussions about what station happens to be playing? And yet, *we're on in all the stores* has become the watchword for the overzealous salesperson who runs back to the station breathlessly informing anyone who will listen that the station is literally only one step away from a "killer book."



## **Rule One: Don't Overestimate The Product Knowledge Of Your Audience**

The likelihood of our average listener planning a trip down to K-Mart for the explicit purpose of listening to WBPE is dim. The comic impression arises of our typical listener working his way down to the men's slacks aisle where the reception is just a little better so he can listen to the Top 9 at 9:00.

**There is absolutely nothing wrong with being on in the stores.**

Indeed, in the long run it will probably be beneficial to the radio stations. It will make retailers more aware of who you are and if sales increase while your station is on, someone undoubtedly will connect the two events. But as for any sort of mass hysteria resulting or subsequent gigantic ratings boost because you are on in the stores, the classic advice is: don't hold your breath.

The corollary to being on in all the stores is being "hot on the street." Somewhere out there is a vast, undefined arena euphemistically known as "the street." We don't know where "the street" is, but most radio people apparently have a tremendous handle on it because one will invariably hear any number of radio people in the course of a day refer to "the street." The program director comes back from lunch and says "I can just sense it, we're hot on the street." A salesperson comes back from lunch with a media buyer and says "the word on the street is we're loaded for bear." A disc jockey comes back from God knows where saying he thinks the book is going to be a disaster. "I don't like what I'm hearing on the street."

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The street exists because of the relative lack of feedback that we must suffer through in the radio industry. We construct our own feedback, our own reality. No place is that feedback more readily available than that great graveyard of radio cliches out on "the street." The message here is simple. Don't worry about what you hear on "the street." Strive to make your radio station the best marketed, the best programmed station in your city. Pay no lip service whatsoever to "the street" and it will most assuredly take care of itself, wherever it is.

### **Underutilizing The First Line of Contact**

The first, and frequently the only contact the average listener has with a radio station is with the switchboard operator. The old adage about "never getting a second chance to make a first impression" underscores perfectly the importance of this position. An yet, far too many stations don't train their phone operators properly. The result is the listener often has to wait interminably only to be gruffly instructed: "WBPE - hold please!"

We have come away with very positive and negative impressions of stations based on our first phone call. The positive receptionist is pleasant, seems to care about what you have to say, apologizes for making you wait, is articulate, and is informed about station promotions and events. He or she will take the time that is necessary to properly deal with the caller's needs. The negative receptionist, (usually overworked) is impatient, sounds exasperated to the caller, is not informed about station events, gets annoyed with "silly" questions, and leaves the caller with the impression that he or she (the caller) is on about the same level with pond scum. Some negative

## **Rule One: Don't Overestimate The Product Knowledge Of Your Audience**

receptionists almost seem to take a perverse satisfaction in the fact that a frustrated caller tells them it has taken "forever" to get through.

The best way to check on your switchboard is to call the station yourself several times a day. If your station is suffering from switchboard overload, several remedies are at hand:

- o During maximum call times, use two operators. The switchboard position is usually near the bottom of the payroll expense grid anyway .
- o Make the operator(s) understand that his/her first obligation is to the listener, not the station employees.
- o Check your operators daily to see what kind of first impression they are creating.
- o Install an extra incoming line that's just for the sales department. Have all business calls routed to that line.
- o Avoid having your switchboard operators become "super screeners." Once they have developed the knack, they will unconsciously begin using it on listeners as well.

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- o Don't be like so many stations where the executives mandate an aura of nonapproachability. This "holier than thou" attitude trickles down to the switchboard operators as well.

Remember, it is critically important that each caller comes away with a positive impression of your radio station. If all calls are treated like they count in the ratings, the resulting good will could come back to you threefold.

## **The Bible For Station Owners**

- o Our listeners are the most important people who will call today.
- o Our listeners can get along without us ... but we cannot get along without them.
- o Our listeners are not interfering with our work - they are the reason for it. Service to them is not a favor from us!
- o Our listeners are not numbers on a list ... they are people and should be treated as such when they call.
- o Our listeners are not people to try and outsmart or out-argue. Winning an argument means losing a listener.
- o Our listeners are people we ask to bring us their needs. It is our responsibility to take care of them.

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### **Not giving call letters and dial positions enough.**

We've actually heard broadcasters tell us that they are afraid they will burn-out the call letters or dial positions by referencing them too frequently. A simple trip to Laurel, Maryland (Arbitron's data processing headquarters) to look at diaries ought to convince anyone who truly believes the fallacy of such a line of reasoning. **You can never give the call letters or dial position enough.** You can't burn them out. For every "phone junkie" who calls you and tells you you are doing it too often, remember there are another 99 non-callers out there who will never call, are probably listening to your station, but don't have a clue as to what the call letters are. This is a particular problem with some talk show hosts. They tend to be so enamored of themselves that they honestly feel they can answer the phone "Hello, you're on the air." On what air? On whose air? Simply because the few people who call you up know your name and call letters, don't think for one second the rest of the silent majority out there has anywhere near that level of product knowledge and awareness. There is the story of one talk show host who answered each call with "You're on the air" so often that several diarykeepers actually wrote down "W-AIR." So, give the call letters as often as humanly possible.

### **Audience Guidelines for Air Personalities**

- o Understand that if you are a world-famous personality, sixty percent of the listeners in your market will be unable to recall your name. If you are a leading market personality, 80 percent of the listeners won't be able to recall

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your name. If you are an average market personality, 95 percent of the listeners won't be able to recall your name.

- o Cross-plug actively. Most listeners don't have a clue what time your show is on let alone the rest of the jocks. Cross-plugging builds continuity and increases cume -- and it won't hurt your show either.
- o Give the call letters or dial position as often as possible. Don't worry about burning them out; that's virtually impossible.
- o Don't assume for a second that the people who call you on the phone are a microcosm of your entire audience. Usually, they are not. The phone should be used as an entertainment vehicle, not as a barometer for the success or failure of your show. Remember, you don't aim your show at the people calling; rather you direct your focus at the vast majority of people who will never call in.
- o Start each day like it's your first day on the air. Don't assume that your listening audience has much product knowledge about you or your show. No inside jokes.

We have discussed in this chapter a number of misconceptions that broadcasters have of the product knowledge of the typical radio listener. The bottom line is that every radio broadcaster must consider every day in radio as "starting over." Treat every day as if you had to win those listeners back all over again. Assume nothing about

**Rule One: Don't Overestimate The Product Knowledge Of Your Audience**

your listener except that each is a prize to be vied for and won every day you broadcast. Adopt this philosophy at your radio station and imbue it in your salespeople and air personalities. You'll be amazed at how your cume and eventually, your average quarter hours will begin to flourish.





## RULE TWO

### WIN THE BATTLE OF UNAIDED RECALL

Average radio listeners stations are generally indifferent toward the fine points of what radio broadcasters do, so stations must constantly be in the forefront. If your call letters are not "top-of-mind," the likelihood of a listener making a diary entry, or telephone recall for your station (even though she's listening to it) is remote. That's why it's so critical that your station must wage war on the battleground of unaided recall.

Simply defined, unaided recall refers to a radio listener's ability to remember listening as it occurred over the past 24 hours (in the case of Birch) or over the past week (in the case of Arbitron). It differs from aided recall in that the diarykeeper or the telephone interviewee is not prompted or provided with a roster of stations from which to choose. The person's knowledge of radio listening has to be readily available in any top-of-mind situation.

#### **Arbitron**

When one considers the actual methodologies of the two leading radio ratings services, an understanding of unaided recall becomes critical for the radio practitioner. Let's look at Arbitron first: Arbitron measures listening with a seven-day diary. The diary is a relatively straightforward instrument that asks listeners to write down the different times during the day over a period of seven days that they actually spent listening to the radio. They are also asked to specify whether the listening occurred at home, in the car, or some other place. Arbitron will first make a random call to

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households (for the listed sample) to find out if the person will accept a diary into the home for the one week period. Each person twelve years of age and over in the household receives a diary. A token gratuity is given in advance of the completion of the diary. Return rates of diaries vary from market to market and by season, but the overall average is generally around 40 - 45 percent.

The diary methodology has a certain set of biases that are unique to it. Historically, the Arbitron diary has seemed to lean a bit in favor of stations with older demographic profiles. The reason is that diaries are usually filled out better and more consistently by older listeners. Eighteen to 24 year-old males, for example, are historically poor at returning diaries and therefore receive an additional monetary incentive from Arbitron. Arbitron has also had difficulty over the past several years with response rates of blacks and Hispanics in a number of major urban markets. Additionally, distribution of diaries to the entire household can sometimes be a problem.

On the whole, we don't have any particular problem with the diary methodology; indeed, it may be a bit better overall for radio because it demands that diarykeepers at least to a certain extent, think a little bit about the radio listening that they have engaged in. But under no circumstances should the diary be construed as a totally objective measure of behavior. For behavior to be accurately measured, the listings in the diary would literally have to be simultaneous with radio listening. People would almost have to have their diaries with them at all times during the day and at each environment where they listen to the radio. However much we might want to believe

## **Rule Two: Win The Battle Of Unaided Recall**

that's the case, it is extremely difficult to believe that diaries are filled out with that degree of precision and care. The more likely scenario is that diaries are filled out perhaps once or twice a day or at even longer time intervals. Many researchers have suggested that Thursdays and Wednesdays are the two heaviest days within which diarykeeping occurs (the diaries are targeted to begin on Thursday with Wednesday being the last day of the week-long diarykeeping period). The minute that the listener goes three or four hours or even a day or two days without making an entry into the diary, what the diary begins to measure is not real behavior, but **perceived behavior**. Perceived behavior is the **recollection** of what the specific listening behavior has been over the past 24, 48, 72 hours or longer.

There are classic examples of how real behavior differs from perceived behavior in the world of radio. Consider the numbers reported by Audiscan, a predominantly Southwestern ratings service which electronically measures what car radios are tuned to at certain checkpoints throughout the city. The technique is all but infallible with respect to its accuracy of measurement at that particular point in time. Ironically enough, there are often disparities between the stations that are leading in the Audiscan report and the stations that are listed at the top of the charts in Arbitron. Even given the fact that Audiscan only measures in-car listening and on a non-random basis, a major reason for the difference is probably this: most average radio listeners are not scholars of the medium. When they have to use unaided recall to chart listening behaviors, it's quite conceivable that they can make errors. They could mention a station they think your morning personality is on, only to be flat wrong.

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However, once a station is recorded in a diary, whether it was actually listened to or not becomes irrelevant. For better or for worse, the numbers stand!

Probably the single most important thing that radio stations have to worry about in the ratings game is to convert their fair share of real listening into reported listening. We've seen many scenarios where listeners will indicate a station they listened to only to realize, under probing, that it wasn't the station they listened to at all. Radio lacks an "electronic diary" that would infallibly record every instance of real radio listening throughout the day and the week, so reported listening becomes absolutely critical. You will recall the analogy about asking your station people what they had for lunch three or four days ago ... and how difficult a process that was for most people. The same is often even more true for radio diarykeepers. How many station people have you talked with over the years who have expressed extreme frustration because they don't feel the real size of their audience is being accurately reported? This is an ongoing problem that will last as long as we have measurement technologies based almost solely on unaided recall.

### **Birch**

Now let's look at the Birch telephone methodology. Birch uses the "last birthday" method to choose people in their radio households. Birch interviewers specifically ask for a person 12 or over who last celebrated a birthday in the household. This is their form of random distribution. Once they have the appropriate person on the phone, the Birch interviewer will ask the respondent about listening "yesterday" between the hours of 5:00 a.m. and midnight. The interviewers probe each individual

## **Rule Two: Win The Battle Of Unaided Recall**

daypart and ask for exact start and stop times and like Arbitron, the locations where listening occurred. A plus for Birch is that they complete only one interview per household.

Like Arbitron, Birch has its own set of biases that are unique to the telephone methodology. The age bias inherent in the telephone process should be mentioned. The Birch system of unaided telephone retrieval seems to have a slight bias against the older demographic profiles and especially older males. This is very simply a function of the fact that it is difficult to get males in American households past the age of 35 to answer the telephone. From our own experiences, the 45 to 54 male demographic is the single most difficult one to get on the telephone and is almost always undersampled in telephone research. Men of that age begin to develop a "line of defense" with respect to answering the telephone. Generally, they are old enough to have children who will immediately grab the phone the minute it rings, and if the children don't pick it up, then the wife is almost invariably the next person to jump on the line. As a result, dad is difficult to reach. Consider the differences between the Arbitron and Birch ratings for a recent major market book. A talk station showed up as the number two station in Arbitron with a six share while the same station was ranked 27th in Birch with a 2.3 share. That's an excellent example of the relative age bias that can exist between the methodologies.

### **A Case for Building Benchmarks**

Whatever your feeling about the two dominant radio ratings methodologies, the one common denominator between the two is that they both demand that your station

## **Rules of the Radio Ratings Game**

occupy a leadership position in top-of-mind awareness in the marketplace. Top-of-mind awareness, as discussed in Rule One, is an absolutely necessary condition of station reporting. Even though regular listening might occur to station A, if the awareness of station A is not good, there is a distinct possibility that listening to station A might be misreported by that particular listener. The key to creating a strong top of mind position is building station *benchmarks*.

A benchmark is something your station airs which a listener can use to reconstruct listening to your station in either a diarykeeping or telephone recall situation. Literally anything that can help a listener remember listening to your station can be classified as a benchmark. Here are some common examples of benchmarks and how stations utilize them:

**a. The station's format.**

A formatic benchmark is very useful to have, particularly if your format lends itself easily to description by a listener. For example, *Country* is an example of a format that is easy to describe. *Easy Listening* used to be fairly simple to identify with and describe until the rash of soft and light adult contemporary stations began competing with the beautiful music stations for that positioning line. *News* and *talk* are relatively easy for a listener to define and can be good benchmarks for the radio station. *Oldies* can be an excellent format benchmark. It gets more difficult when you get into the broader based contemporary formats (particularly with adult contemporary and sometimes even with CHR).

## **Rule Two: Win The Battle Of Unaided Recall**

### **b. The call letters or dial position of the radio station.**

Everyone can talk about "famous" call letters or dial positions in different markets around the country. And sometimes the ones that are famous with broadcasters even go so far as to be famous with listeners. The dominant listener response for identification, at least in diaries, is still the call letters by a wide margin. The reason is because the diary literally asks for you to write down the call letters when you are filling it out.

### **c. Personalities.**

Even though listeners usually don't write down the names of personalities in diaries, they are very useful in helping a listener identify listening to a particular station. Interestingly though, not every high-priced and high-rated DJ in a market place is an automatic benchmark for the radio station. Many DJ's have tremendous name recognition, but a good number have a very difficult time linking that name recognition with the proper station affiliation. This ought to be a compelling argument to make all air personalities give the call letters more frequently. Research has indicated on numerous occasions that while top-of-mind recognition for a personality was excellent, the ability to identify the call letters associated with that personality was not very good. This creates a completely miscredited benchmark for that particular radio station.

However, in the case where a disc jockey is not only highly known, but also accurately identified to a particular radio station, the effects on not only the disc jockey's program, but the overall radio station can be astonishing. Names that come

## **Rules of the Radio Ratings Game**

to mind are Dave Maynard at WBZ in Boston, Rick Dees at KIIS-FM in Los Angeles, The Greaseman at DC101 in Washington, Ron Chapman at KVIL in Dallas, and Salty Brine of WPRO-AM in Providence. This is hardly a complete list, but it is fascinating to see how many "visible" personalities around the country are relatively "invisible" with respect to how well their call letters are identified. From our observations, it appears that all air personalities that are benchmarks for their radio stations are also self-marketers along with being fine air personalities. They are out in the marketplace continuously. They are promoting. They are constantly forging the identity link between themselves and the radio station.

### **d. Positioning Lines and Handles.**

Occasionally an extremely strong positioning line or handle that suggests a real benefit to the listener or attaches easily to the call letters or dial position can become a benchmark. The use of the word *power* in front of a number of stations' dial positions has proved to be very beneficial as a benchmark. The *light rock* or *light* approach has also been fairly useful from a benchmark standpoint. Though longer positioning lines may serve to aid the on-air imagery of the radio station, they do not in themselves emerge as benchmarks. This doesn't mean that longer positioning lines shouldn't be used. Indeed, they are extremely effective in creating the imagery for a radio station. However, they are not something listeners tend to spout back on a regular basis. (See Rule Three for a discussion on slogans and positioning lines.)



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### **e. Promotions and Contests.**

Promotions and contests can be very useful for radio stations as benchmarks. One thing that KRTH in Los Angeles has done quite well is positioning itself as "the trip" station. Magic 102 in San Diego makes a strong case as the station where one can hear classic rock and win classic cars. Contests that are well received in the market place can create a lot of visibility for the station and be tremendous benchmarks. WKCI in New Haven has been a long time supporter of \$1,000 Thursday. Lots of aggressive stations have gotten good mileage out of their relationship with Disney World in Florida. Some stations have very strong cash giveaway positions, other stations invest heavily in cars and other forms of transportation. Bottom line: For a contest and promotion to qualify as a benchmark for a radio station, not only does it have to be **enjoyable** and **listenable**, it also has to be memorable and as is the case with personalities, instinctively linked to the radio station.

### **f. Non-Musical Features/Survival Elements.**

Adult Contemporary Concepts founder, Tom Watson, is fond of saying, "All listeners need survival information in varying doses." The extent to which your station is perceived as the market leader in one of those areas, be it news, weather, traffic, school cancellations, or sports, can have a direct bearing on your overall cume. As lots of aggressive radio broadcasters have demonstrated, survival benchmarks can be created. Witness the case of a station that desired to create some additional morning drive benchmarks beyond the lead DJ. Seizing upon a strong need for more weather in morning drive as demonstrated by the research, the station took a frustrated talent who happened to be the general manager's secretary, *Wendy, The Weather Girl*. Wendy became

a fixture in the morning show with her one-word weather cast. Preceded by a small drumroll and a bit of pomp and circumstance, Wendy would proceed to deliver the weather in one-word forecasts. The talent would toss it to her and she would reply, "the weather in a word is H-H-H-H-H-H-H-O-T!"

**g. Outdoor/TV Advertising**

A good billboard campaign or a great TV spot can be an excellent benchmark for your radio station. While the great TV spot or the billboard campaign may not make listeners turn on your station in droves, it will certainly have an impact on the ones who are not quite sure that they listen to you, even though they actually do. As we'll discuss in Rule Nine, a good TV or outdoor campaign can unleash your "loot come."

**How Many Benchmarks Do You Need?**

There is no firm rule regarding how many benchmarks a station must have. Some stations, based on how their programming days are constructed, may not need a number of different benchmarks. Other stations may find that they have seven or eight relatively strong benchmarks but no major benchmark. One clear rule is that if your station has no benchmarks, you will quite simply have no numbers! There is a distinct correlation between the ability of a listener to be able to talk about a radio station (identify benchmarks) and the tendency of that listener to report listening for that radio station in a ratings diary or telephone interview.

## **Rule Two: Win The Battle Of Unaided Recall**

Table One is a fairly typical profile of what a market leader in a soft AC format should expect to have. The left or total column indicates the number of different top-of-mind responses that 500 listeners ages 25-54 had for station A. Each response in effect can be categorized as a potential **benchmark** for the radio station. Looking vertically down the chart, probably the two most important categories for this station's purposes are the listeners who "responded" soft and mellow rock and those who said "don't know." Let's start with soft and mellow rock. Overall, 22 percent of the 500 listeners gave a "soft and mellow rock" response as a top-of-mind awareness benchmark for station A. Research across the country has indicated that for a station to be a market leader in a Top 50 market it must have some sort of **double digit** benchmark, preferably one regarding its music or the style of music the station plays. In this example, the 22 percent is an excellent score. Reading on down the column to the bottom, the station's overall "don't know" score (in other words, those people who responded "I Don't Know" when asked to react top-of-mind to station A) is an acceptable 22 percent. We will discuss acceptable levels more in the "Don't Know" chart at the end of this section. Among the core listeners of station A however, the "Don't Know" drops to a 2 percent, which is about where it ought to be for a leading station.

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**TABLE 1**

**RESEARCH EXAMPLE OF AN AC MUSIC LEADER IN A TOP 50 MARKET**

*PLEASE TELL ME WHAT COMES TO MIND WHEN I MENTION STATION A*

		<==== Favorite Station >====				
		Station <u>A</u>	Station <u>B</u>	Station <u>C</u>	Station <u>D</u>	Station <u>E</u>
Total Responding	500	100	100	100	100	100
Soft & Mellow Rock	22%	29%	20%	14%	15%	23%
Mellow Music	14%	7%	16%	14%	18%	20%
Variety	10%	6%	12%	8%	10%	14%
Oldies	8%	12%	6%	6%	12%	11%
Easy Listening	6%	8%	8%	6%	4%	4%
Joe Morning Guy	4%	10%	3%	1%	2%	1%
Good Music	4%	2%	6%	5%	3%	2%
Mellow Hits	4%	4%	1%	7%	5%	3%
Weather Guy	2%	6%	1%	4%	2%	0%
Thursday Money Game	2%	6%	1%	4%	2%	0%
Rock and Roll	2%	5%	3%	3%	0%	1%
Don't Know	22%	2%	28%	30%	23%	27%

**Source: The Benchmark Company**

## Rule Two: Win The Battle Of Unaided Recall

Of course the immediate question that comes to mind is how can someone identify themselves as a core listener of station A and still answer "Don't Know" to the top-of-mind awareness question? The answer is that it happens all the time. It's entirely likely that that person who identified himself in the initial part of the interview as a listener of station A really isn't a listener of station A but another radio station. Or, he simply may be a listener with no earthly awareness of what the station does other than being able to regurgitate the call letters. All of the other favorite stations represented in this survey are stations whose listeners fall into the 25-54 demographic profile. The reader will notice that the language used to describe station A is typical of listener language around the country. Mellow music differs from *soft and mellow* rock in the mind set of the listener. Variety is another typical descriptor of *adult contemporary*. *Oldies* is another very frequent term used to describe today's AC stations as is *easy listening*, particularly with females. Notice that the morning man gets a 4 percent unaided recall score overall. For a morning man on a soft AC station, that's not a bad score at all. Notice that the only place that the morning man gets a really decent score is with the core listeners of station A. That makes sense. He is not a fixture across the marketplace because the music is quite simply what the station sells. Another key to station A's success is that other non-core listeners across the board could readily identify Station A's major benchmark. If you are an Adult Contemporary station and your benchmark profile looks like this, you will be one of the top three or four stations in your market.

Table 2 shows a classic example of a leading CHR in a Top 50 market with a strong morning show. The first and most important double digit benchmark is the 17 percent

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**TABLE 2**

**RESEARCH EXAMPLE OF A CHR LEADER WITH  
A STRONG MORNING SHOW IN A TOP 50 MARKET**

*PLEASE TELL ME WHAT FIRST COMES TO MIND WHEN I MENTION STATION F*

		<==== Favorite Station =====>			
		Station <u>F</u> 100	Station <u>G</u> 100	Station <u>H</u> 100	Station <u>I</u> 100
Total Responding	400				
Sam & Dave's Morning Zoo	17%	29%	20%	10%	9%
Top 40 Music	13%	25%	13%	6%	8%
Rock and Roll	10%	3%	17%	10%	10%
Sam's Corny Jokes	8%	15%	6%	5%	6%
Major Money Contest	6%	8%	2%	5%	9%
Wade R. Wettson's Weather Reports	6%	8%	4%	4%	8%
Hit Music	5%	5%	4%	6%	5%
Big John	4%	2%	3%	1%	2%
Rock Music	4%	0%	5%	7%	4%
Top 9 at 9	3%	4%	1%	4%	3%
Old Guy on TV	2%	3%	1%	1%	3%
Don't Know	22%	0%	25%	40%	33%

**Source: The Benchmark Company**

## **Rule Two: Win The Battle Of Unaided Recall**

compiled by the *Sam and Dave's Morning Zoo*. The station has two double digit music benchmarks in *Top 40* and *Rock and Roll*. Another strong mention is Sam's humor at 8 percent. Other elements in the morning show such as the weather and sports with *Big John* also showed well along with a favorable "Don't Know" profile of only 22 percent. Also of interest is that the core listeners of station F define the music of the radio station as *Top 40*, not *Hit Music* and not *Rock and Roll*. This is a station that is maximizing its core audience. They are benchmark-educated and aware of the radio station. They understand what's going on which is a necessary step to reporting listening to station F. Even the listeners who came station F have a fairly good profile of the radio station, and with the exception of the listeners of station H, are able to talk meaningfully about the critical benchmarks for station F.

In Table 3 we see an AC station in a Top 50 market that is not doing as well along with a CHR station in Table 4 that is not the market leader. You'll find the differences both graphic and interesting.

The critical problem here for station J is not only a dangerously high lack of awareness among its own core listeners (18 percent don't know), but an almost total absence of product knowledge among the other station core listeners that it should be sharing come with. Notice that there are no double-digit music benchmarks whatsoever. And the overall "Don't Know" of 56 percent is in the danger zone.

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**TABLE 3**

**RESEARCH EXAMPLE OF AN AC STATION IN A TOP 50 MARKET  
THAT IS NOT A MARKET LEADER**

*PLEASE TELL ME WHAT FIRST COMES TO MIND WHEN I MENTION STATION J*

	Total Responding	<==== Favorite Station =====>			
		Station <u>J</u> 100	Station <u>K</u> 100	Station <u>L</u> 100	Station <u>M</u> 100
Oldies	7%	10%	5%	6%	7%
Soft Rock	6%	17%	3%	1%	3%
Variety	5%	2%	8%	4%	6%
Easy Listening	5%	16%	2%	1%	1%
Soft Music	3%	8%	1%	1%	2%
Rock	2%	1%	2%	2%	3%
Good Music	2%	0%	5%	2%	1%
Rock and Roll	2%	1%	4%	2%	1%
Country	1%	0%	1%	2%	1%
Elevator Music	1%	0%	3%	1%	0%
Other Responses Less Than 1%	10%	21%	6%	5%	3%
Don't Know	56%	18%	60%	72%	74%

**Source: The Benchmark Company**



## **Rule Two: Win The Battle Of Unaided Recall**

Historically stations that have "Don't Know" levels this high do very poorly or at best just average in the ratings. They are susceptible to more wobbles than their higher-ranked competitors because they don't have the benchmark strength to sustain, for example, a book where the unweighted distribution of diaries or phone interviews was not favorable to station J. If your radio station's ratings are only so-so at best, there is an excellent chance that your top-of-mind research profile resembles the one in Chart 3. Stations that have this type of profile generally fall into two categories: 1) they are brand new and just beginning to build an audience (best case scenario) or 2) they are poorly marketed radio stations that have not constructed the benchmarks necessary for consistency in the ratings game. We consider 50 percent as the "danger line" above which is not profitable for a radio station to venture.

One of the strengths of market-leading CHR radio stations is that they have a fairly wide range of identification across other listeners who come to the station. While they may not be everybody's favorite station, they are certainly ranked among the top three stations that people listen to. That's why the cumes are traditionally so high. The station in Table 4 is five share points behind the CHR leader and does not have the kind of cume that it needs for effective market growth. One of the problems here is a relative lack of identification across the stations they should most likely share cume with. Again we see no double-digit benchmarks, which is always an indication that the station is not doing well on the unaided recall battle front.

If your CHR station has a benchmark research profile that resembles the one in Chart 4, you should probably pay a lot more attention to the elements in the morning show

**Rules of the Radio Ratings Game**

**TABLE 4**

**RESEARCH EXAMPLE OF A CHR STATION IN A TOP 50 MARKET  
THAT IS NOT A MARKET LEADER**

*PLEASE TELL ME WHAT FIRST COMES TO MIND WHEN I MENTION STATION N*

		<==== Favorite Station =====>			
		Station <u>N</u> 100	Station <u>O</u> 100	Station <u>P</u> 100	Station <u>O</u> 100
Total Responding	400				
The Wacky Wake-Up Show	8%	20%	6%	4%	2%
Top 40	6%	14%	5%	5%	0%
Hit Music	5%	7%	8%	1%	4%
John Blitzer	4%	10%	2%	0%	0%
Rock	4%	1%	1%	0%	10%
Commercials	4%	2%	7%	5%	2%
Don't Like Music	4%	0%	3%	3%	8%
Oldies	3%	1%	2%	2%	7%
Teen Music	3%	3%	3%	4%	2%
Disco	3%	0%	4%	4%	4%
For Young People	2%	0%	0%	1%	7%
Other Responses Less Than 1%	8%	22%	6%	4%	0%
Don't Know	46%	20%	52%	67%	54%

**Source: The Benchmark Company**

## **Rule Two: Win The Battle Of Unaided Recall**

and the overall marketing of that phenomenon itself. The listeners who are aware of your station seem to have a reasonably good idea of what kind of music you play, but there are simply not enough listeners who have that level of awareness.

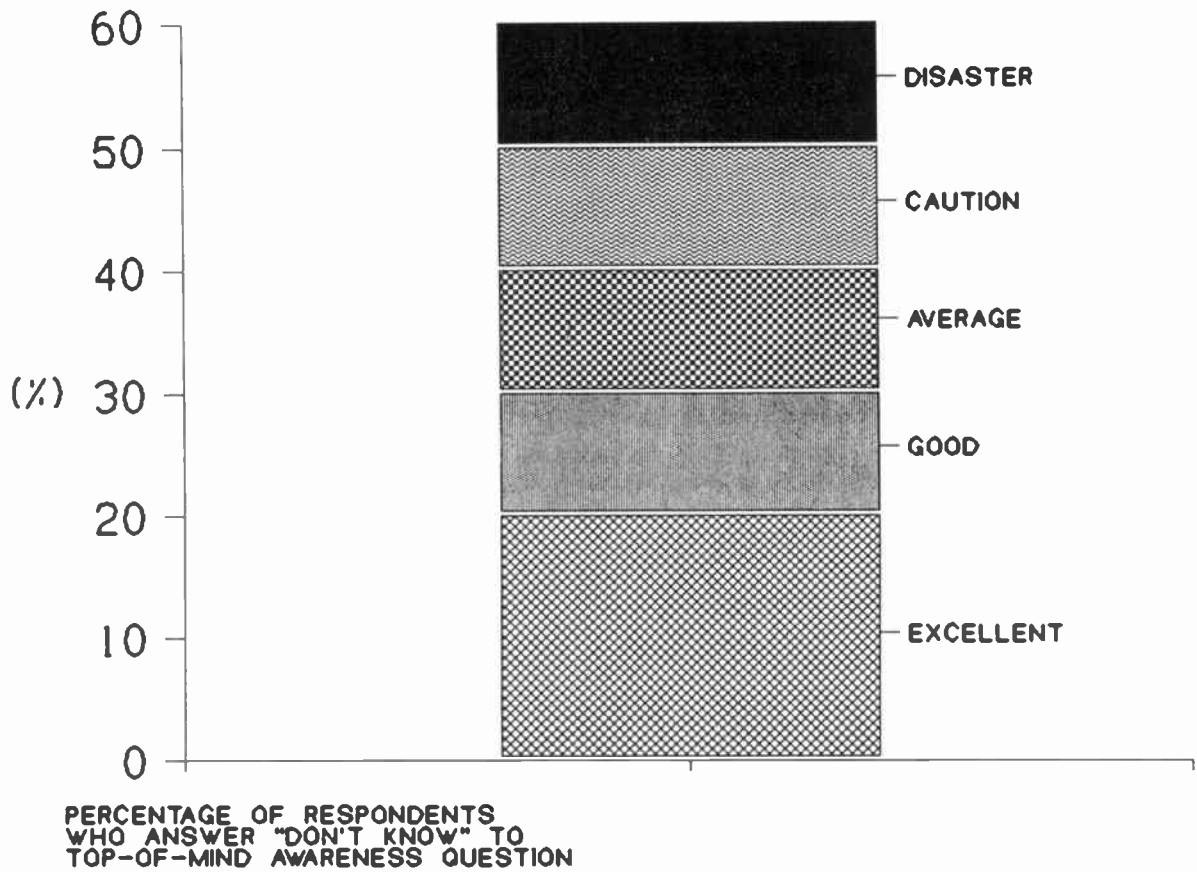
The numbers in Chart 3 are based on over 300 benchmark studies performed in the last five years for clients in every conceivable format in the United States. Any time your "Don't Know" profile is 20 percent or below (among your target audience) your station should be in pretty good shape. We consider 20 percent or below to be an excellent score. Again, these numbers are relative and are based on national averages. Traditional market leaders -- stations that are number one or two in the marketplace -- will often have "Don't Know" scores across their target demographic (and not just with their core audience) of five and six percent. Those scores are possible because virtually everyone in their market place who is in the target demographic has some idea of what the market leader does and has some benchmark for them.

We see 20-30 percent on the "Don't Know" profile as being good. Several people have asked how we can possibly suggest that three out of ten people who know nothing about your radio station is a "good" score. The reader must remember here that "good" is a relative term. Compared to the perceptual performance of stations around the country, 20-30 percent is a good score.

Rules of the Radio Ratings Game

CHART 3

WHAT "DON'T KNOW" LEVELS REALLY MEAN



Source: The Benchmark Company

## **Rule Two: Win The Battle Of Unaided Recall**

If one had to create a profile of a typical radio station with "average" ratings, the station's "Don't Know" score would fall somewhere in the 30-40 percent category. Of course it would be much lower in its core audience, but based on some of the examples we have seen it would be much higher with the listeners of stations they share come with. Scores of 40 to 50 percent should be viewed with caution. We find that stations don't stay in the 40-50 percent category too long. They are either on their way up moving into the average and good category, or they are on their way down moving toward disaster. Perhaps we should re-label this element on the chart "caution/optimism" because of the relatively transitory nature of that particular set of numbers. The fifth and final area in the "Don't Know" profile, 50 percent and above, generally correlates with ratings disaster. Half of the target audience has no idea of who you are. You have either had a bad book or you're going to be on the way to one.

### **Using The "Don't Know" Profile To Predict Market Vulnerabilities**

Chart 3 can be used to assess the health of particular stations in a marketplace. Here is a classic example: In a large Northeastern market, we were asked to conduct a study to find a "hole" in the market. The rep firm steadfastly believed that the hole existed in CHR where the market leader was dominating and had double-digit shares. The consultant was of the same opinion and the research indicated that was an acceptable option. However, the market CHR leader had tremendously intense benchmarks. Their profile was as rock solid as any we have seen in several years. On the other hand, the station that was leading the AC market with a 7.1 share had a

## **Rules of the Radio Ratings Game**

terrible "don't know" profile. What that suggested to us was that the 7.1 share was temporary and not locked in. Out of all the formats where an immediate impact could be made, soft AC was the way to go.

It is possible for a station to have good numbers in the face of a poor "don't know" profile. What usually happens more often than not, however, is that those numbers are short-lived, and no more than one to two books in duration. They are often as much a part of Arbitron and Birch sampling irregularities or a total lack of any remotely competitive format. Our client went directly after the soft AC and the competitor's 7.1 share dwindled to a 1.8 in one book while our client debuted with a 6.7. The "don't know" profile has been a very accurate part of the benchmark research process and is something that every station in its own research should pay particular attention to.

### **What Does Your Staff Think The Station's Benchmarks Are?**

Needless to say, we are bullish on building benchmarks as an integral part of following the "Rules of the Radio Ratings Game." One particularly interesting thing a good general manager can do at his/her radio station is to conduct a benchmark meeting with key staff personnel. The GM should ask them to write a list of what they perceive to be the station's benchmarks and compare them with his/her lists and the program director's lists. Then look at them with respect to the outside research. You may find the results extremely interesting. Building benchmarks will have a positive effect on everyone at your radio station because they will begin to realize

**Rule Two: Win The Battle Of Unaided Recall**

that they can all be a part of the process of creating a positive radio ratings environment at your station.





### RULE THREE

#### LET THE LISTENER KNOW WHAT YOUR STATION DOES

It is amazing how many radio stations, while sounding technically good on the air, don't give their listeners a concrete idea of what their station does. In the never-ending struggle for creative positioning lines, we often drown ourselves in a sea of verbiage, none of which has any meaning to our target listeners. It sounds great to the practitioners of radio, but it generally flies right over the collective heads of most average listeners. Table 5 looks at some broadcaster words and then show the "literal translation" into language.

As discussed throughout this book, it is dangerous to assume that listeners know what we are trying to say or communicate to them. We have seen many broadcasters around the country use words to promote their stations that are distinct "broadcasters' words." We once saw a broadcaster put up a billboard that said, "ADULT CONTEMPORARY RADIO FOR ADULT CONTEMPORARY YOUR TOWN." If you have ever been guilty of a "faux pas" like that, read on. We'll share some others observed around the country over the last several years. We saw a station that had nothing but the following on its billboard:

K - 99

**Rules of the Radio Ratings Game**

**TABLE 5  
BROADCASTER VS. LISTENER STATION DESCRIPTIONS**

<b>Broadcaster Descriptions</b>	<b>Listener Descriptions</b>
AOR	hard rock, rock, heavy metal, rock and roll
AC	variety, lite, soft, or mellow rock, easy listening (particularly with females), mellow music, nice music
URBAN	black, soul, R&B, disco and dance
CHR	Top 40, pop
BEAUTIFUL MUSIC	dentist office, elevator music (non-fans) ----- easy listening, "my" music (fans)
CLASSIC HITS	oldies, oldies but goodies

### **Rule Three: Let The Listener Know What Your Station Does**

The broadcaster who put up the billboard probably decided that everyone out there knew exactly what it was. Yet, in specific research on this billboard, 30 percent of the audience didn't have any idea that it was about a radio station. They thought it had something to do with dog food! Notice the board made no mention of FM or radio either.

Then K-99 got smart. They added the following to their billboard.

### **K - 99 THE RIGHT STATION!**

A broadcaster seeing this billboard would immediately acknowledge the meaning that K-99 is the right station for news, the right station for music, the right station for sports, etc. Interestingly though, we had a number of listeners who told us that the "right" station obviously meant that it was not the left station or that it wasn't the train station. A good number of the people had no earthly idea of what the "right" station meant.

So K-99 tried another one:

### **K - 99 THE CENTER OF EVERYTHING!**

## **Rules of the Radio Ratings Game**

Lo and behold, one of the trade magazines reported it and fifteen or twenty other stations around the country jumped immediately on "The Center of Everything." We're not even sure the broadcasters knew what the slogan meant, let alone the listeners. Here's another favorite seen over the years:

### **K-95 NOW WITH INCREASED POWER!**

This is the type of billboard designed to attract our friend who is about to go down to K-Mart and listen to K101 in the men's slacks department! K-95 is a very poorly rated radio station that made the mistake of going on the air with less than full power. After three months and a dismal debut book, they upgraded to full power and celebrated the event with this billboard. Again, the majority of the listeners, in fact 99 percent of them, didn't know that the station was initially powerless, so why could they possibly care when it suddenly became powerful?

Here's another one we found interesting:

### **THE BEST RECORD COLLECTION IN TOWN WBPE**

In testing, this board was seen by 25 percent of the respondents, particularly 35+ females, as being a billboard for a record store. They never made the necessary mental "leap" that such a slogan requires.

### **Rule Three: Let The Listener Know What Your Station Does**

## **IQ      IQ, TOO Station Q**

It has been something of a tradition around the country for stations with a Q in the call letters to emphasize it. Needless to say, some consultant was quoted as saying it was a tremendous idea to exploit the Q and radio stations, ever hungry for that last original idea, jumped on the "Q Express" in waves. The above "IQ" approach was actually spirited from the *Ron Rico Rum* campaign several years ago and was supposed to be a cute way of expressing product/image identification. The problem was that in testing, most listeners saw this particular station as one you had to be smart to listen to. That may be all right in Berkeley, but it doesn't play too well in some other areas of the country.

## **WBPE TRY US, WE FIXED IT**

This billboard was from a top 25 market on the west coast and rivals only "now with increased power" in graphic overestimation of listener product knowledge. The implication here is that everyone knew WBPE was broken, hence when station management fixed it, there should have been considerable interest on the part of the audience. The fact that there was virtually no interest on the audience's part in the "fixing" of WBPE only further attests how utterly out of touch we can be with how we see it verses how our listeners see it.

## **NO MORE MR. NICE GUY**

This particular billboard has on it "No More Mr. Nice Guy." Once again we must caution the reader that these billboards were all observed on major intersections in Top 25 markets throughout the United States. From 1985 on, this particular billboard had boxing gloves at each end with the phrase "No More Mr. Nice Guy." Of course there were innumerable boxing jokes brought out. One rep jokingly suggested that the call letters be changed to WBOX, the nation's all-new twenty-four hour fight format. The listeners were totally confused. What the management here appeared to be attempting to do was to make a statement not to listeners, but to the advertising community. Now anyone who wants to survive in radio in the 80s and 90s realizes that there are two distinct audiences out there that have to be served. But the listener and the advertiser must be treated as two separate audiences. "No More Mr. Nice Guy" Apparently was a rather bold statement regarding a diminishing supply of freebies that were available at the station: no more trips, no more concert tickets, no more perks. You want a spot, you pay cash. That was the explicit message behind the "No More Mr. Nice Guy." Unfortunately one must look at what "No More Mr. Nice Guy" accomplished in the competitive environment. From all we can tell, it was not a successful campaign.

### **You Are Not A Typical Radio Listener**

There is a tempting question to ask here. With all the collected talent available in the American radio, how could such non-productive campaigns be constructed? The answer

### **Rule Three: Let The Listener Know What Your Station Does**

is a simple one. As much as many broadcasters claim to know the audience, they really don't know them because they see the audience as an extension of themselves and as we know, the sad truth is that once you have been a broadcaster for a month, a week, even an hour, the odds are you will never again listen to the radio like a typical listener. Your ear will listen for the length of the stop-set. Your ear will listen for their promo and the cross-plug coming out of the break. Your ear will listen for all sorts of things that the typical listener never pays any attention to. If you get nothing out of reading this book other than this point, it will be well worth it. Don't hang your hopes on how your station sounds to you and you alone because even though you think you are objective, you can't think any longer like the real listener. Owner/Operators and general managers are particularly susceptible to this malaise. Also realize that the people that you "hang out" with, to a certain extent, all become second-line critics because they know the business you are in. We are talking about spouses, social friends and worst of all, business acquaintances.

### **Your Friends Are Not Typical Listeners Either**

A general manager attended a social function one night and at least a dozen people came up to him to tell him what a great job a particular host had done on his radio station. He was beaming from ear to ear. He said to me, "Here they are, just average, regular, everyday people." They are **not** just average, regular, everyday people. They are average, regular, everyday people who happen to be an acquaintance of the general manager of a radio station; this makes them considerably different from the vast majority who don't know the general manager of a radio station and would never take the time to seek him out.

## Rules of the Radio Ratings Game

### THEY ARE THEM, BUT WE ARE US!

Another interesting example of radio broadcasters attempting to appeal to so-called audience buzzwords is apparent in this billboard. *They are them, but we are us.* The implicit message here was an appeal to core urban listeners to disregard a newer competitor. This slogan was motivated along the lines of racial chauvinism, but most of the urban core audience it was intended to reach apparently had little idea what the slogan meant or what it was intended to convey.

#### Why Cutesy Expressions Hardly Ever Work

To understand why we so often miss the mark in radio with cute expressions on billboards is because billboards don't really play the role most of us would like them to play in the station discovery chain. There's an implicit belief out there in radio-land that billboards actually act as potential aids for audience conversion and discovery. Nothing could be further from the truth. In all the research we have conducted over the past five years, we have seen that billboards function primarily as agents of reinforcement and not as agents of conversion.

The simple reason for this lies in the ways that American radio consumers **discover** radio stations. Table 6 provides a list with average percentages of the dominant ways that listeners first remember listening to their favorite radio station.



### Rule Three: Let The Listener Know What Your Station Does

TABLE 6  
METHODS OF DISCOVERING "NEW" STATIONS

	Method	% Listeners
1.	Punching around/Dialing around	45%
2.	Word of Mouth	25%
3.	Grew Up With It	10%
4.	Heard it in someone else's car, at someone else's home, etc.	5%
5.	Big cash giveaway or promotion	5%
6.	TV Commercial	4%
7.	Billboard	3%
8.	Newspaper Ad	1%

Source: The Benchmark Company

It should come as no surprise to anyone that dialing around and punching around are the dominant ways that people discover radio stations. As we have discussed, there is no sanction or risk against dialing or punching around. It's not going to cost you anything. It's not something in which you have to make an investment. It's not something you have to think a lot about. The buttons are there. This whole process is greatly facilitated with the scan/seek functions of new digitally tuned radios. The music awaits. There is nothing to prohibit you from punching in and out until you hear something you like.

## **Rules of the Radio Ratings Game**

What a good billboard accomplishes, then, is to convey to the listener that here's a station you've probably listened to already this week. Here are the call letters and here is the most significant benefit of what this particular radio station has to offer. What that good billboard does is to reinforce listening that has already occurred to that radio station. An effective billboard can put a little glowing electronic sign on your call letters to help lock them into the mindset of the average radio listener. Rarely is a billboard going to actually cause sampling. It is hard to envision the scenario where the listener looks at your billboard and is so smitten with what the billboard has to say that he or she begins frantically searching up and down the dial for your station.

### **What Makes a Good Billboard?**

As we stated, billboards are agents of reinforcement or a way of helping the listener cut through all that station image clutter. Realize that the cuter and funnier and more grotesquely characteristic they get, the more we lose. Billboards that win have several key things in common:

- a. The call letters and the dial position are graphically and visibly displayed. They dominate the billboard. All the cutesy expressions that your ad agency can come up with (as demonstrated on the preceding pages) mean absolutely nothing if the station identification is not larger than life.
- b. The one significant selling point that differentiates your station from the rest.

### **Rule Three: Let The Listener Know What Your Station Does**

- c. Possibly the most critical point of all: your billboards should use listener language. All the examples earlier in this chapter that we gave you were broadcaster creations. Listeners don't talk in those terms.

#### **Say What You Mean!**

Consider the scenario of a large eastern market station that had gone to an oldies format. Their numbers were average. They resisted calling themselves oldies, however, and danced around it with every broadcast euphemism for the word oldies that one could imagine. Finally, after a year and a half of frustration they bit the bullet and began actually using the word oldies on the air. The station's cume immediately shot up dramatically. Now does that mean that thousands of new listeners instantly discovered this radio station because they used the word oldies? Not at all. What it means is that oldies was a word with which listeners could identify and relate. Something around which they could describe listening to that particular radio station. It gave the station a benchmark, a handle. Anytime a station can do that for its listeners, the likelihood of that station getting greater reported listening is going to increase significantly. Reminiscent of the novelty book several years ago Real Men Don't Eat Quiche, one could make the argument that real listeners don't use words like "classics," "gold," or "monster," rather, the simple truth is they use the word "oldies."

## **Rules of the Radio Ratings Game**

### **The Language of Yuppies**

If there has to be one common denominator in terms of language that we have heard at radio stations around the country, it is the word "upscale." Sales forces are no longer content to simply deliver numbers. They must be upscale numbers. They must be the right qualitative numbers. They must be the numbers that figure nicely with everybody's upscale buys. Of course you have all heard of the yuppie. That's an acronym for a Young, Urban Professional. The yuppie syndrome, however, has been blown so entirely out of proportion by radio stations that if you talk to virtually every station in every format, that's who they claim to be appealing to. Let's not lose sight of the fact that for every yuppie, there are plenty of people who don't make \$50,000 or more a year. Do you think those people don't buy soft drinks? Do you think they don't buy fried chicken? Do you think they don't buy cars? They are fervent consumers of every one of the products the top ten spot radio advertisers attempt to sell, but because they don't match our expectation of what we want our upscale listener to look like, we ignore them.

### **Use Words That Work**

The key point here is to use words that work. Use words that the listener understands. If your station plays Rock 'n Roll Oldies, then let the listener know that! If your stations plays Top 40 Hits, let the listener know that as well. Our industry has currently embraced "classic" as the word of the year, but classic can be very misleading to a number of listeners. Some will literally think of you as a classical music station. Indeed, we have heard several "classic hits" stations in their on-air promotional announcements doing verbatims from the listener comment lines

### **Rule Three: Let The Listener Know What Your Station Does**

and then tagging it as "classic lines for classic hits." We think that's much. The best billboard we have seen recently that approaches the issue head-on uses the term "classic oldies." Now that sets up the oldie itself as something very special but also explains the use of the word "classic" and makes it very logical, nonconfusing, and nonthreatening.

The bottom line is to say what you mean in words that listeners can understand and relate to. Don't try to please your sales staff at the expense of how you sound on the air and remember most times the ad agency gets involved, things get Cute, Lively, and Incredibly Overdone. As you'll notice, the first four letters in bold spell CLIO (the major award in advertising). To be a success, your advertising should be directed at achieving effective communications with your target audience, not showboating for advertising awards.

### **Handles Are Content-Free**

While it's debatable who first began using "handles" like Magic and Power, there is no denying their popularity in contemporary radio. It's important to understand that these are essentially content-free handles -- they really don't mean much to the listener. Research shows that "magic" has a variety of different interpretations. It will not, in and of itself, position your radio station. You must do that by constructing a variety of slogans and positioning lines. The same is true for power. Not every station using the word has had the success of some of the power stations. The key for those stations is they have translated "power" for the listener. They have given it the meaning they want it to have.

## Rules of the Radio Ratings Game

The key to the widespread popularity of "magic" and "power" probably lies in two areas -- ambiguity and memorability. They are both **memorable** and they can be whatever you want them to be. Contrast that with another popular term in use today, "Lazer." Lazer is less ambiguous and more specific. Its scope is narrower, and it banks heavily on the popularity of compact discs (CDs). We predict a quick demise for "Lazer" as a handle.

A number of stations have been enamored over the past several years with formative lines that make them the "class" of their market place or the "classy" station. In a recent national study of 1,773 households, when we asked people for a top-of-mind description of what kind of music a "classy" radio station played, the dominant answer, by 29 percent of all listeners, was classical! Classy is a good campaign that somehow got away from its basic intent. Broadcasters jumped on an increasingly heavy bandwagon and started building "world class" radio stations. This truly boggles the imagination. Most listeners wouldn't know a world class radio station if it hit them on the backside. Another problem with the word "classy" is that it necessarily limits the scope of the audience. People who do not perceive themselves to be "classy" can be quickly turned off. They might listen, but many won't write it down! Let's face it, in spite of everything one reads about a millionaire cropping up everywhere one turns around, there are still unfortunately 235 million of us out there who haven't reached that status yet. Indeed, there are 200 million people living in the United States that don't have per capita income of \$50,000.00 a year!

## **Rule Three: Let The Listener Know What Your Station Does**

### **Slogans Have Meaning**

Slogans differ from handles in that they are designed to have meaning. Their success for radio stations revolves around several variables:

- o Does the slogan clearly communicate a station/listener benefit?
- o Is the slogan specific?
- o Does it create a benchmark for the radio station?
- o Does it accurately depict the **sound** of the station? Can the station back-up the claims made in the slogan?

For example, the slogan "The Only Station That Plays Ten In A Row," while correct in design, will backfire if your program staff does not religiously adhere to it. The same is true for "Number One for Music and Fun." We have seen stations using that slogan that, quite frankly, have no business doing so because they are not fun. Unaware as they may be, it doesn't take listeners long to figure out that you're not what you say you are on the air. Ultimately that's the kiss of death.

How about "A Fresher Variety of Hits?" Fresh is a word with many possibilities, but you must **define** it for your listeners. Don't rest your hopes on the chance that they will hear it and understand what you want them to understand.

What about "Kiss?" Left undefined by the station, "kiss" doesn't mean CHR or soft AC or urban. It means "kissing" and "lips."

## **Rules of the Radio Ratings Game**

It is always useful, when applicable, to use the word **most** to describe your music. Listeners of the 80's are into superlatives like best, most, biggest, etc. We'll talk more about using superlatives to construct market positions in Rule 7.

## **Stay With Your Slogan**

The key to all slogans is once you have made the choice, **stay with it**. Don't continue to bombard the listener with one slogan after another. Develop two or three basic themes and stick with them for at least a year. Remember, as we said in Rule 1, about the time we are getting sick of hearing something, the audience is just beginning to have some identity for what we are doing.



**RULE FOUR**  
**BE MEMORABLE**

For a diarykeeper or telephone respondent to recall your station's call letters, one (or more) of three things must happen:

- o They must remember your call letters.
- o They must remember your dial position.
- o They must remember one or more of your **benchmarks**.

The key word is **REMEMBER**. Being memorable increases the likelihood that your gap between "real listening" and "reported listening" will be small. But memorability is often difficult to achieve -- and the ways to reach it are often obscured in the entire radio marketing process.

**The Argument For Promotion**

Anyone acquainted with the basics of marketing is aware of the so-called four P's of the marketing process. They are in order: product, place, price, and promotion. The manipulation of those four P's in varying degrees account for the ways that people make products different from competing products that share the same inherent qualities. In short, how do I differentiate myself from the other radio stations on the dial that in effect, all play music, charge nothing for it, and demand very little from the consumer?

## Rules of the Radio Ratings Game

### Price and Place

The four P's of marketing actually work against radio broadcasters as they attempt to delineate their station from other stations. That's why radio can't be marketed like a retail product. Of product, place, price, and promotion, radio loses two of those in the marketing translation. First and foremost we don't have price because as we have discussed in previous chapters, our product is free. We don't sell sets, so we can't have a sale, one of the traditional ways that retailers move inventory. Secondly and perhaps as critical, we cannot control place. Again in retailing, we would have complete control over where our products are exposed and how that exposure is constructed. We can decide if we want to make a point-of-purchase display, how we want to array our products on the shelves, the color schemes, the primacy versus recency arguments in terms of placement of products. All of those are extremely important in the marketing process of retail items. In radio though, place is chosen by the listener. So we lose two of the four critical P's, price and place, and we are left with product and promotion.

### Product

Unfortunately, there is not a whole lot we can do about new music product either. We can't send a memo up to the boys and girls in the research labs asking for something that tastes lighter and yet has a sweeter, darker, more mystifying sub-aroma to it. We can't ask them to produce a product that really does taste wonderful but is considerably less filling. We are dependent on what we get from the record labels. It's a shame the record industry doesn't do better market research to address the issue of product because admittedly all one has to do is monitor of a couple of Top 40 play

## **Rule Four: Be Memorable**

lists around the nation to realize that current product is not at all legendary! How many of these tunes will be with us a year from now or even five years from now? The answer is probably not very many. And there is only room for so many classic formats in any market. So it's incumbent on us to maximize every aspect of the product that we can control.

### **Promotion**

That leaves us with one final P -- for promotion. It is the one consistent link that broadcasters will have to differentiate their product over the rest of this century.

### **Common Promotional Mistakes**

- a. Underutilizing your own air.**
- b. Working the Newspapers.**
- c. Make Sure You Don't Give Away The Calls In Promotion.**
- d. Not Tying Your TV Campaigns With Your On-Air Promotions.**
- e. Putting Too Much Emphasis On Event Marketing.**
- f. No Consistency Of Message Structure.**

- a. Underutilizing your own air.**

Many practitioners of radio have always had some hard rules on the relationship of time and money. Every commercial availability that can be sold represents inventory and hence, profit for the radio station. But unless the station delivers an attractive audience to the prospective buyer, that inventory generally is wasted and is not sold at its maximum price. The most compelling vehicle that you have as a broadcaster for

## Rules of the Radio Ratings Game

reaching and embellishing the audience -- your core audience -- is your own air. Jingle packages are fine and a necessary ingredient in creating an overall identification with the sound of your radio station. But how many radio stations really take the time utilize their own air in such a way that they educate their listeners?

There is a story of a young radio account executive who was about to close a large order and was drooling over the financial possibilities that were immediately in sight. He had the paperwork prepared and all the appropriate forms drawn up, i's dotted and t's crossed, when the client threw up one more stumbling block. He said to the account executive:

CLIENT - *"You know you've convinced me, and I must say you have done quite a nice job of doing so, that I should be on your station for the next fifty-two weeks of the year. And that I should take sixty seconds at a time to tell people about my store, how to get there, and about the benefits to be derived from shopping at my store. But it occurred to me while listening to your radio station the other day, that you do essentially in three seconds what you are asking me to take sixty seconds to do. How come?"*

EXEC. - *"Well sir, those are our jingle packages and it's how we identify ourselves. They are quite common throughout the industry."*

CLIENT - *"Yes, but if you can get the message across in three seconds, why can't I do the same?"*

#### **Rule Four: Be Memorable**

The account executive was quite literally lost for words. He went back to the general manager of the radio station and presented the problem as it had been presented to him. The general manager, upon hearing of the size of the potential account, called the owner and in a heated discussion they decided that sacrificing one sixty second spot was not going to be the end of the world. It would get them a huge order and might even do the station some good. The account executive got the order and the station put their best production people to work and came up with a campaign for the radio station. They created a man and woman who generally met somewhere in a social environment, exchanged some idol chit-chat about the affairs of the day, and talked about why they both listened to station WBPE. This was well in advance of the *Molson's Beer* campaign that used the same, basic strategy. They were fun, enjoyable to listen to, and over a period of time they became benchmarks for the radio station. What is more astonishing is that the station's numbers rose from a 2.5 share to a 4.0 share over a period of a year and a half. The station changed nothing else during the time period other than adding the valuable educational aspects for its own core listeners of what that particular radio station was really all about. Each time you utilize your own air, you're creating an educational scenario not only for your core listeners, but for all your cume listeners who know only what they hear while punching in and out!

#### **A Television Technique**

Utilization of our own air is where we could take some considerable lessons from our colleagues in TV. If you follow them through the course of the day, local TV stations

## Rules of the Radio Ratings Game

leave you absolutely no doubt when their news is going to be on or what time their network fare begins. Some might even say they beat you to death with a literally endless barrage of promotions and yet, TV stations in non-metered markets suffer from a similar set of diary-based methodological problems that radio broadcasters do. They too, must fight and win the battle of unaided recall. The benefit that they have is that there are fewer TV stations than radio stations -- so it's easier to remember, but the war must be waged, nonetheless. TV people around the country appear to be more cognizant of that and more willing to plunge in and do it than radio people.

Here is a sixty second announcement that we ran on WRKO in Boston several years ago simply as a way to get to reinforce impressions of listening.

*"Hi, my name is Jerry Williams of WRKO radio. You know, they say talk is cheap but here at WRKO we don't believe that for one second. Cheap? (Cut to caller screaming at Jerry) Insane maybe! (Another sound effect of a wild Williams phone call) Sometimes at the edge of control. (Cut to a call) Controversial! (Another wacky outtake) No folks, talk isn't cheap here on WRKO, it's free. So tune us in at WRKO, your kind of talk!"*

The creative and effective use of one's own air can be a tremendous benefit to building cume and reported listening at your radio station. Is it worth the avails in the short term? Maybe not. However, in the long term, done with consistency, it will make up for lost revenues and more!

## **Rule Four: Be Memorable**

### **b. Working the Newspapers.**

Some radio broadcasters argue that TV time schedules are more time and event-oriented than broadcast listening schedules. After all, there is *TV Guide* and the daily listings in the newspaper. Radio stations do not enjoy the advantage of such thorough listings. Why not? Why shouldn't each radio station's daily lineup be run in the paper each day just like the TV stations? Some of it has to do with lazy promotion departments at radio stations. A lot of it also has to do with existing prejudices at news desks. One editor once told us, "I can list your morning show from 6 to 10, but I can't break it down or talk about anything that occurs or list anything during that time frame because the show is so unpredictable." Newspaper people usually feel they have to be able to list something that is going to occur at a specific time built around a specific theme. But just because it isn't being done now doesn't mean you can't be the first to develop a realistic daily "radio schedule" that a newspaper can run with.

That brings us to a discussion of radio and TV "critics." There are some very good print markets for radio in the United States. Votes go to Detroit, Chicago, Miami, Denver and Los Angeles to name a few, though there are relatively few that go beyond the cursory listing of the Arbitron numbers and the obligatory posting of a personality or format change. If your newspaper market is "radio dead," inject some life into it. While listeners may not be hanging on every syllable, they do find it interesting to read about "the business" and it can't hurt to get those call letters out there one more time.

## **Rules of the Radio Ratings Game**

### **c. Make Sure You Don't Give Away The Calls In Promotion.**

In a study we did in 1987, several listeners made the comment that WBPE was obviously the radio station that was owned by *Coca Cola*. This is often what happens when an overzealous sales staff begins selling every promotion that comes along. Listeners gradually begin to realize that everything that you give away on the radio station is tied in some way shape or form to *Pepsi*, *Coke*, *Miller Lite*, or one of the advertisers that lend themselves so heavily to one of those types of campaigns. The key danger here is that when you constantly align yourself with a national advertiser who has far more national exposure and clout than your station does, even though your promotion initially reads the "*WBPE/Miller Lite Summer Tan Contest*," if you wait a couple of months, the WBPE will drop off of there completely.

### **d. Not Tying Your TV Campaigns With Your On-Air Promotions.**

In spite of noble attempts by some commercial production companies and their "cross-plugs" campaigns, many radio stations put their TV spots out for view, only to have those spots essentially forgotten throughout the twenty-four hours of the station's broadcast day.

Realize that the more you can pound home the message in the TV campaign -- be it more music/more often, or whatever the particular TV slogan happens to be, the better off you will be. For starters, we recommend the thirty-second quick and dirty approach. Simply lift the audio off the TV commercial and run it on the radio station. You can get more ambitious as you go, but whatever you do, make sure that your TV campaign is being reinforced on your air. If there are key points being made in the



#### **Rule Four: Be Memorable**

campaign, make sure that your production people and your announcers are reinforcing them throughout the day.

#### **e. Putting Too Much Emphasis On Event Marketing.**

The last two or three years have been very big for our friends in the retail and service industries utilizing "event marketing." Event marketing takes its name from a nice piece written thirty years ago by Daniel Boorstin called "The Image,"<sup>1</sup> in which he detailed the creation of the so-called pseudo event; i.e., an event which would not exist for any reason other than the fact that somebody endeavored to create it for public relations benefits. A case in point is the 50th anniversary of a hotel. Even though that hotel's 50th anniversary was three years away, the hotel seized the time and gave itself a 50th anniversary bash. It helped sales in the process, it created a lot of copy for the 11:00 p.m. news and gave the hotel a much needed shot in the arm.

Politicians are master users of the pseudo-event. Dissident groups in the '60s became experts at staging pseudo-events as vehicles to create media coverage. While most of the really great radio stations around the country have long been utilizers of "pseudo-events," it seems that in the last couple of years, radio has taken a cue from companies like *American Express* and *Chrysler* in their fascination with "event marketing." Witness their tie-ins with an event such as the refurbishment and ultimate unveiling of Lady Liberty. Of course, Lee Iacocca was prominently displayed in

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<sup>1</sup> Daniel J. Boorstin, "From News-Gathering to News-Making: A Flood of Pseudo-Events," in Wilbur Schramm and Donald F. Roberts (eds.), The Process and Effects of Mass Communications, (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1971), pp. 116-150.

## Rules of the Radio Ratings Game

virtually every ad for it, a beautiful free tie-in for *Chrysler*. *American Express* pledged that for every dollar spent on the card they would donate one cent to the restoration of Lady Liberty. It was a classic made-for-television event which major advertisers were able to jump in on. It was great for the large, national corporations. They could afford it, plus the event marketing was only part of an aggressive national marketing campaign. There is a danger though, when local radio broadcasters attempt to throw all of their promotional armament in the "event" basket.

Let's take an example: We know a station that insists on spending some two hundred thousand dollars a year to dominate the fireworks show in their particular marketplace. We have often argued with them that that money could be far better spent on TV and on demographically-targeted promotions, but they have been adamant and steadfast that that contest is a tradition that gets them a lot of public good. Yet fewer than ten percent of the overall market is aware of the fact that this particular station sponsors the fireworks show! Still another station we've seen spends a large amount of money to conduct a Christmas tour of the city on an annual basis. Our sentiments about these types of events are that they are great, if you have a virtually unlimited budget and can still cover all the necessary basics. But don't think for a second that because you sponsor a fireworks show on the 4th of July, no matter how fabulously successful it might be, that it can be your sole promotional emphasis for the year. Within two to three months, the awareness will have all but withered away. If you sponsor the fireworks show, you must continue to remind your listeners in the course of your other promotions that you are the station that makes it happen. To fail to do so is to minimize the impact of the event in the long-term.

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##### The Implications of "Ambush Marketing for Radio"

The fact that *McDonald's* shelled out literally millions of dollars to be the official fast food sponsor for the 1988 Winter/Summer Olympic Games did little to phase *Wendy's International, Inc.* They had their restaurant wallpapered with Olympic-like symbols and ski-racing posters that proudly announced "we'll be there."

What *Wendy's* was doing to steal the thunder away from Big Mac is euphemistically known as **ambush marketing**, a concept attributed to Jerry Welsh, formerly a marketing executive at the E.F. Hutton group. Indeed, it would seem that all is fair in love, war, and hamburgers.

The strategy was simple. Rather than sitting back and allowing *McDonald's* to reap the benefits of having the official Olympic rights locked up (saving millions in the process), *Wendy's* was simply sailing in on *McDonald's* coattails and not allowing Ronald and Company to have what some would consider their duly earned privilege of six months of Olympic exposure. *Wendy's* was in effect saying, "just because they are the official sponsor, there is no law that says they should be able to reap all benefits of a special event."

The *McDonald's* people did not admit to being worried, but instead of using the Olympic symbol -- which they were barred from doing -- *Wendy's* was using the

## Rules of the Radio Ratings Game

three-ringed ABC symbol which to the uninitiated viewer is almost identical. In this corner, despite *McDonald's* disclaimers, we would say score one for *Wendy's*!

The implications for radio become immediately apparent. Radio stations have become more event market-oriented in the past several years. Let's suppose that you are closed out over affiliation with an event that you very much wanted to have (for whatever reasons). A traditional pose would be a slight shrug of the shoulders and a "well, we'll get the next one." But do you have any sort of moral or ethical obligation to step back and allow your competitor their moment in the sun because they outbid or outsmarted you? The answer is a resounding "no".

We have all heard of stations that have a chance to get their morning guy on stage to introduce some super act that is affiliated with one of their competitors. Yet that kind of spirit and aggressive enthusiasm has always been a function of AOR/CHR stations. Stations with older demographic targets seem to be reluctant to get into that kind of fray. The moral obligation that exists is one to make your station as visible as you possibly can. The fact that it may come at a competitor's expense should not be a major issue.

Let's suppose your competitor sponsors the official fireworks display this summer in your market. It's a major media event. Can you take advantage of ambush marketing? Absolutely! Here's how: Hire some models. Make sure your call letters are prominently displayed on their persons. At the gates of the event on that night and throughout town, have them distribute packets of imitation fireworks with discount

#### **Rule Four: Be Memorable**

coupons inside with your call letters prominently displayed on the packet. Have a contest on your station that features a free limo to pick up the winner to watch the fireworks and dinner for two at the city's most exclusive restaurant. Print out paper "seats" that be handed out for sitting on the grass with your station's calls on them. Rent a private plane for the evening and have a contest where the winning couple gets to fly above the fireworks. Find out where there is an erupting volcano in Hawaii and send two lucky winners to a natural fireworks display while tagging it with your call letters. These are all things you can do to steal the thunder from the sponsor of a so-called official event.

This is not dirty pool. Ambush marketing simply implies a moral and ethical obligation to be as aggressive as you can in your own marketplace. To be anything less than that would be a disservice to all the people who listen to and participate in your radio station.

#### **f. No Consistency Of Message Structure**

One of the big problems in radio broadcasting is that advance planning with respect to advertising and marketing is seldom given much more than lip service. Campaigns are often jettisoned after one bad book because the pressure on the management team to deliver revenue is enormous! As a result, stations develop promotional themes that are often haphazard. Themes are thrown up around a spot that has been bought on the spur of the moment at a convention by a management team that is reacting instead of acting. Look back at the lessons learned from the truly great radio stations and the consistent numbers they deliver. Their message structure and continuity is

## Rules of the Radio Ratings Game

uniform and they very rarely deviate from it. Listeners always know what they are going to get and are always reminded of when they are going to get it. Try as they might, they can't forget what that station does because the station is always letting them know. We will talk more about how to structure and effectively plan a good TV campaign in Rule Nine, but the reader should be left with one clear point here: stations that win are stations that consistently deliver a message and a saleable product. They find out what the listener wants to hear, do their best to insure the listener gets it, then go even further to make sure the listener remembers he or she heard it on their radio station. Again, that consistency of promotion and product are the only two P's of marketing that we have any control over.

### Converting the "Lost Cume"

One of the keys to memorability is the entire issue of garnering the reported listening that you actually deserve. Let's restate a simple premise. If we had an electronic measuring system to instantaneously record and report all radio listening, gauging our success as broadcasters would be much easier. Unfortunately, we have a system where real listening behavior is not always the issue; perceived recall of that behavior often is the issue! While real listening is important, the listening that the listener actually reports is the issue. An extremely effective way to spot a station's efficiency is to measure the gap between real and reported listening as shown in Chart 4. Traditionally, top-ranked radio stations have a very small gap and in a few rare cases, reported listening that actually exceeds real listening. The listeners who fall in the middle zone between real listening and reported listening constitute the "Lost Cume." They are listeners who actually listen to a radio station but have no

## Rule Four: Be Memorable

idea which station they are listening to. Virtually all radio stations suffer to some degree from the lost cume phenomenon.

### How To Tell If You Are Losing In "Reported Listening."

There are a number of ways to gauge whether your reported listening is off:

- your cume is unusually low;
- your time spent listening patterns are erratic and seem to follow no consistent pattern; and
- in your custom research, you may find that your morning personality's overall awareness is quite good but the linking of him to your radio station is poor.

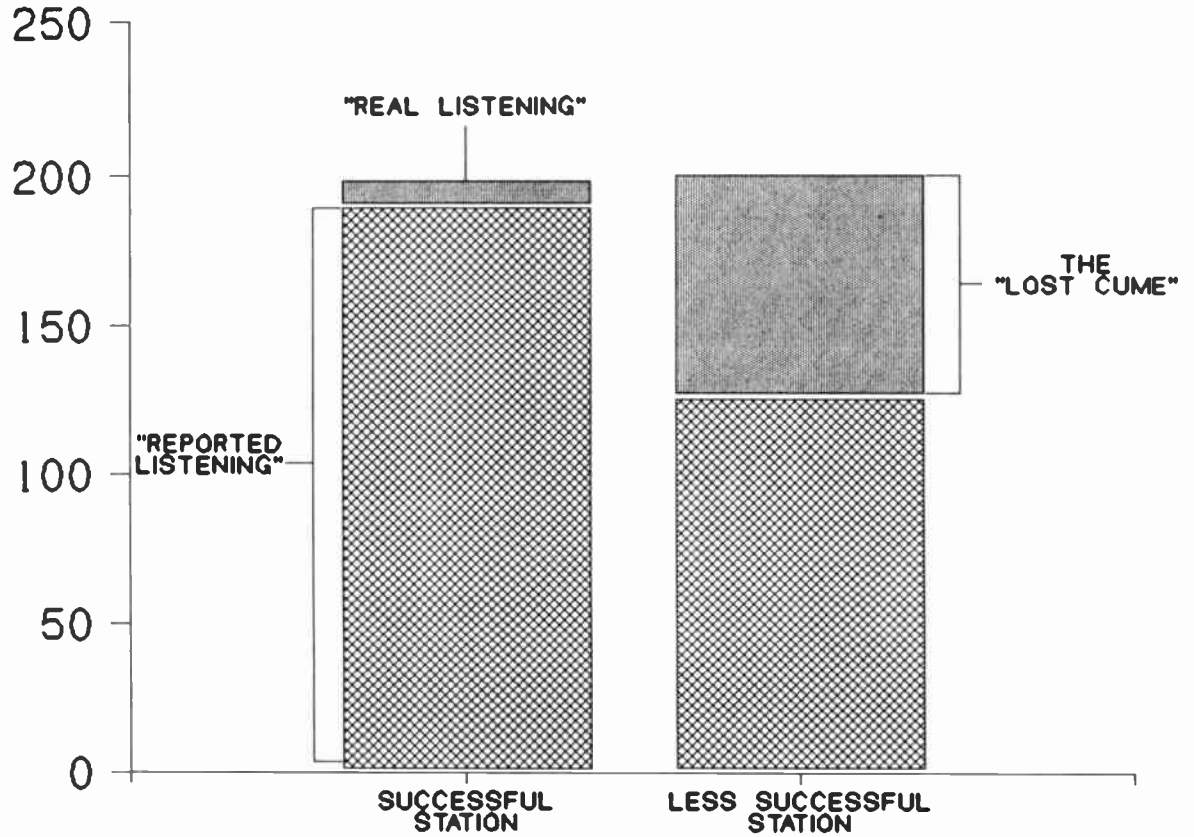
This classic example of real listening not being converted into reported listening is illustrated in Chart 5. The chart is entitled "Two Morning Men."

### Converting Real Into Reported Listening

The reader will notice that in terms of top-of-mind awareness Morning Men A and B score almost identically when tapes of their shows were played with the call letters removed. One was identified at 75 percent and the other at 78 percent in terms of name identification. These are great numbers for both personalities. It means they both have substantial top-of-mind identification. But there's one critical difference: personality A does not give the call letters regularly while personality B does. Personality A feels he is widely known, which he is! But only 36 percent of those listeners who identified him could place him at the correct station. In comparison, 61 percent of those who identified talent could place him at the correct station. In

CHART 4

"REAL LISTENING" VERSUS  
"REPORTED LISTENING"



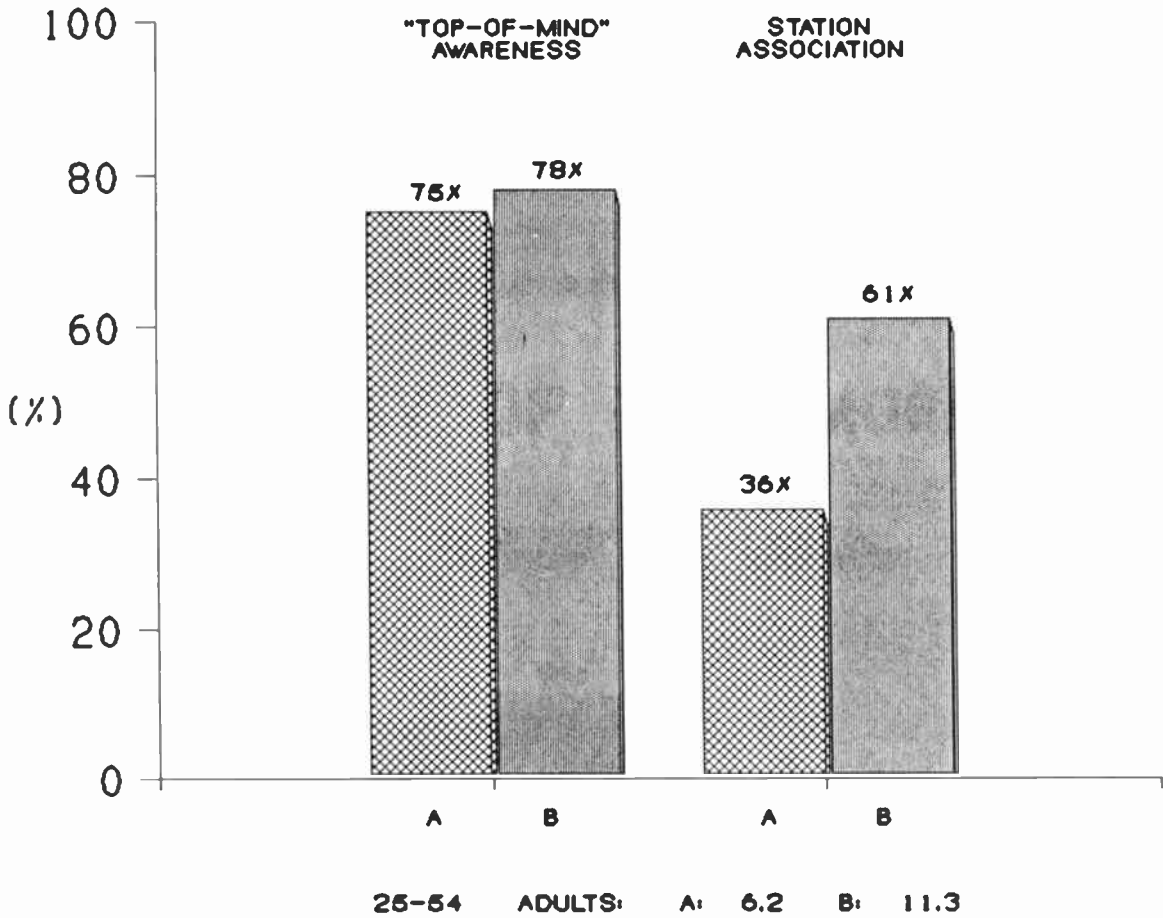
Source: The Benchmark Company



**Rule Four: Be Memorable**

**CHART 5**

**THE STORY OF TWO MORNING MEN**



**Source: The Benchmark Company**

## Rules of the Radio Ratings Game

actual market numbers 25-54, talent B beats talent A by 11.3 to 6.2 in morning drive. This classic illustration of not converting lost cume should make each air personality in America a born-again call letter giver!

Where does the lost cume go? If you are unlucky, they write down your competitor. If you are lucky, they write down somebody completely out of the framework so you wind up getting hurt less. Under any scenario, when you don't convert your real listening into reported listening, your station loses, and in terms of total cume patterns, radio loses.

### A Note On Promotion Directors

While a few lucky ones have great Promotion Directors, many stations can't quite decide what role they want their Promotion Director to assume. As a result, these stations often wind up not using their own air effectively enough.

The Promotion Director functions as sort of a subordinate of the Program Director at many stations, but we feel that is wrong. Allow your Program Director to program. He or she needs to direct the programming. Tend to the music, work with the personalities and make the station sound as good as it can possibly sound. The Promotion Director should be an upper-level executive skilled position. Don't throw this job away! The Promotion Director should be a full-time employee and his or her responsibilities should involve more than putting together co-op promotions with *Pepsi* and *Coke*. As a number of radio stations have found out throughout the years, good

#### **Rule Four: Be Memorable**

Promotion Directors are worth their weight in gold. A good Promotion Director can keep your station's image fresh, interesting, and can help you develop and maintain a sense of on-air identity. Rethink your strategies on your Promotion Director. Make some demands on that position and you'll be pleasantly surprised!

We will close this rule with one final thought. There is one effective way to take real listening that your station actually gets and to ensure credit for that listening. There is one way to convert lost cume. That is through the effective maintenance and construction of benchmarks for your radio station.



## RULE FIVE

### FORGET QUARTER-HOUR MAINTENANCE

Back in the age when everything was simple, diarykeeping was a simpler process as well. There weren't that many radio stations around (indeed, many FM stations weren't even listed in the ratings until the early 1970s). When there were only a couple of radio stations doing their thing, it was relatively easy to "counter-program" against a competitor by moving news up five minutes or by scheduling your clock so that you'd flow the music from 7:10 a.m. to 7:20 a.m. thereby sweeping the listener by a quarter-hour (since Arbitron credits fifteen minutes of listening for a minimum of five minutes written down). It was indeed possible to convert ten minutes of listening into thirty, hence the basic premise behind quarter-hour maintenance.

Things in radio are much more complex as the 1990s approach. In most of the Top 50 markets, there are multiple format competitors, particularly within the CHR and Adult Contemporary ranks. Expecting one simple programming move to pay off in an immediate ratings boost when there are other possibilities out there for the listener is naive at best. Quarter-hour maintenance can only work if the diary is being kept in its best case scenario; the listener is literally carrying it around with him or her seven days a week and paying constant attention to it. Unfortunately, the average listener is hardly going to be aware on Wednesday night that you swept him or her across the quarter-hours on Friday morning of the week before, while trying to recount his or her listening patterns. As we have discussed in other chapters, unless the person is a super diarykeeper, what will be remembered most are the benchmarks for your particular radio station as they relate to how he or she recalls his or her own listening patterns. The recall of specific quarter-hours has always been and will certainly continue to

## **Rules of the Radio Ratings Game**

be a reality of the Arbitron diary process (and in Birch to some degree as well). What we are suggesting however, is that stations don't need to stake their entire lot on the desperate notion that every quarter-hour must be "swept" in some particular and unique way.

## **Marketing And Promotion As Tools Of Quarter-hour Maintenance**

To successfully create the concept of time spent listening or hours spent with your radio station, you must suggest to listeners that your station is one that they spend a lot of time with. There are many stations that get their mail letters out but fail to suggest to listeners that they listen longer to their station. If you have agreed with us by now on the earlier message that listeners are easily confused, you'll hopefully agree that it is critical to make your station the one they associate with "long listening." In unaided recall terms, what time spent listening really means has almost nothing to do with the way a lot of program directors perceive it. You can't and shouldn't have the notion, as so many PD's do, that there is an almost linear relationship between every song played or programming move made and time spent listening on your radio station. There usually is not. What there is, at best, is probably an aggregate total of ideas and perceptions on the part of that one individual listener that ultimately constitute whether he or she perceives listening to you a lot or just a little. In crude terms, for most radio listeners, that's the true reality of quarter-hour maintenance.

## Rule Five: Forget Quarter-Hour Maintenance

### Build Time Benchmarks

So what are you to do? The first thing we suggest is to concentrate on building "time benchmarks." This means establishing a time reference point for something unique to your radio station around which a listener can remember listening. If you have a particular unique formatic element, like your "joke of the morning," it may be something you would want to showcase at 7:10 a.m. or 7:20 a.m. It reminds listeners, particularly four or five days after the listening has occurred, that they were listening to you around 7:10 that morning. Unaided recall logic suggests that if the listener has an easier time remembering some specific time that listening occurred, you are much more likely to get closer to full credit for the minutes or hours that were **actually** spent listening.

### Sell The Sizzle

Another way of establishing a high perception of time spent listening is to literally cement yourself in the listener's mindset as the station that dominates the "in-a-row" or "more" music positions in the market. You can play quarter-hour maintenance games to your heart's content and achieve very little with respect to a dominant marketing position if you don't remind the listener that your station sounds better with increased listening. In truth, the **telling** is always as important as the **doing**, as long as you keep your promises to the listener.

We are all familiar with the old sales axiom, "sell the sizzle and not the steak." Yet, it is quite astonishing how often radio broadcasters, while challenging their sales staffs to go out and make the station's image sizzle, are reluctant to actually achieve that

## **Rules of the Radio Ratings Game**

same image and sizzle on their own air. To create a four-in-a-row position and dominate the market with it is pure sizzle! America is a nation that loves sizzle. Walk into any fancy restaurant and look at the appetizers. If your choices were goose liver, snails, and fish eggs, do you think you'd belly up to the appetizer bar at \$9.95 a pop? Highly unlikely. But when the restaurant lists foix gras, escargot and beluga caviar, you feel perfectly justified, indeed vindicated, in picking them out and ordering. What's the difference? Image! Ours is a society that often worships context over content. The fact that our sitting president has virtually sailed through two terms with some of the highest popularity indices in current history despite a plethora of problems, the likes of which virtually annihilated his three immediate predecessors, stands in mute testimony to that fact. Want to create more perceived time spent listening? Find innovative ways to make your station sizzle! Radio stations can and ought to realize that image, in terms of public awareness of what you do, is what it's all about. We'll discuss more about market positions and how to create them under Rule 7.

### **Creative Cross-Plugging**

One of the chief problems in ratings methodologies that force the respondent to utilize unaided recall is that people quite simply forget when or to what they listened. As mentioned, if we had a truly electronic ratings system for radio, unaided recall would become a thing of the past. The listeners would give full credit for listening without having to strain their memories to remember what times over the week they actually spent listening. Since it appears that both the diary and the telephone unaided recall interview will be with us for the foreseeable future, the smart thing to



## **Rule Five: Forget Quarter-Hour Maintenance**

do will be to understand the nuances of those systems as well as one can. And the cornerstone of both ratings methodologies is that your radio station reminds people of the time they actually spent listening to the radio.

Don't take for granted that the listener, even a day removed from the actual listening, will be able to reconstruct that listening with any degree of accuracy. This is where creative cross-plugging on your own air can be such a tremendous tool. Virtually all competent program directors understand how to put a good cross-plug system on their radio station. If that's the case, then why don't more stations utilize the tool? Since most listeners don't have a really solid idea of what specific time each individual show is on during the broadcast day, it certainly can't hurt to remind them. If you think they know the actual times your shows are on, guess again. Most are as likely to tell you that your morning show lasts from 6 a.m. to 7:30 a.m. rather than 6 a.m. to 10:00 a.m. It takes very little air time to effectively cross-plug the key benchmarks that occur on your station during the day, and it should be done ritually. The rules are simple:

- keep the plugs brief and enjoyable to listen to;
- give the listeners some small taste of what your radio station will sound like the rest of the day; and
- reinforce their memory of what it sounded like earlier in the day.

## **An Argument For Teasing**

Lots of people have come out during the last several years and said that it's wrong

## Rules of the Radio Ratings Game

to "tease" your listeners. We disagree. The way most stations tease is in a relatively innocuous anyway. We are hardly suggesting that you list all twelve songs that are going to be played in the hour, but rather that you tease some of the time benchmarks you have coming up in each daypart. This is nothing more than utilizing effective elements of good gamesmanship. As for being a major audience turn-off, if it's handled creatively and constructively, you will be amazed at the positive effects of teasing on time spent listening.

**RULE SIX**  
**KNOW THE DIARYKEEPER**

There is a rule in talk radio: Don't run your talk show for the five people who are making your lines light up; run your your talk show for the 95 thousand listeners who will never call the station. The concept is identical with the diarykeeper or telephone respondent. Some radio people have been known to sneer when talking about ratings survey respondents. We have heard comments like, "You mean to tell me I have to program this radio station to those who fill out the diary or answer telephone surveys? Are you telling me that this is just some sort of a game?!"

Absolutely right! There are elements of gamesmanship inherent in the scenario for the reasons discussed throughout this book. It's a game with the highest stakes imaginable: your career. Every game has a set of rules. In the ratings game, the most critical rule is understanding who the players are and how to program to them. In our case, the players are diarykeepers or telephone interviewees. Under this rule, we'll discuss some general characteristics of ratings respondents that we have gathered from our own experimental diary based research:

**a. Greater Length Of Listening**

We believe the diarykeeper is usually a larger than average consumer of radio. Generally, the more an individual listens to the radio the greater the likelihood of filling out a diary. When we do a telephone survey, we screen all perceptual research participants for a minimum of twenty hours per week of radio listening. This ensures that we will talk to people who listen to an average or greater amount of radio and hence would be more willing to keep a diary.

## Rules of the Radio Ratings Game

In reviewing those individuals who have accepted our experimental diaries versus those who did not, there was one interesting characteristic in common. As recalled listening for a week dropped, the likelihood of diary participation went right down with it. A note of caution: just because people listen to a lot of radio doesn't necessarily make them able to fill out a diary or take a telephone interview and flawlessly reassemble their listening day or listening week. While there is truth to the notion that close to 70 percent of all reported listening comes from so-called "first quintile" listeners, diarykeepers don't appear to be any smarter or more fundamentally aggressive from a listening standpoint.

In our ongoing quest for truth and knowledge in radio, given the nature of our business, we conduct numerous interviews with airline flight attendants and cab drivers on their radio tastes and preferences. One such encounter occurred on a flight from New York to Los Angeles. A particularly chatty flight attendant from Orange County, California, upon discovering our radio connections, proceeded to tell in length about the individual nuances of the *Rick Dees Show* on KIIS in Los Angeles. The woman confided that when she was in town, she listened to the radio as much as ten to twelve hours a day! Of course, she never missed a moment of the *Dees* show. When asked if she received a diary in the mail, would she be likely to fill it out, she indicated that she would be honored to do so. So here was a living breathing first quintile listener. Our discussion closed quite unexpectedly when she made the following comment, "You know, I think it was the best thing that K-HITS ever did to hire Rick Dees." So much for a correlation between lots of listening and accurate

## **Rule Six: Know The Diarykeeper**

station awareness! Not only did she get the station wrong -- she mentioned a station that no longer existed! The moral here is simple: even heavy listeners don't listen to radio the way we want them to. Hence, keep your goals high, but keep your expectations realistic.

### **b. Passive Listeners**

Our research has shown that the majority of people inclined to keep diaries do not tend to exhibit the same characteristics as your hyperactive "contact-the-station-twelve-times-a-day" superlistener. An argument could be made that diarykeepers in general (with acknowledged exceptions) tend to be more passive than some of the more visible listeners we come into contact with. But diarykeepers often don't sound like the type of listener that stations so passionately want to embrace: upwardly mobile, socially affluent 25-40 year old females!

### **c. Middle America**

As a rule, the diarykeeper we have isolated is a slice of Middle Class Americana. The income is typically in a lower/middle range. Interestingly, (according to our diary research) as income rises reported radio listening and the likelihood of keeping a diary falls. Our feeling is that Arbitron and Birch should build separate weighting criteria for households that earn over \$75,000 because they are probably extremely under-represented in the radio research process.

## **Rules of the Radio Ratings Game**

### **d. The By-Word Is "Average"**

As a rule, diarykeepers don't cooperate with radio station executives who are desperate to find that attractive, upscale yuppie listener that they can generalize their entire audience base from. As often happens when stations conduct their own panel research and confront their listeners up "close and personal," they are often dismayed to see the type of individual who attends these sessions. We have sat in focus group facilities with clients and watched them turn up their noses at the so-called "average people" who assemble in the screening room. We have seen groups of intelligent broadcast executives virtually ignore the comments of eight "average people" in a room to focus on the comments of one listener who appeared to be "upscale."

### **Love Your Listeners - Whatever They Look Like**

No one likes to confront intimations of their own mortality and for broadcast executives, sitting in a focus group watching living, breathing, diarykeeping and telephone respondent types can be an experience that comes close to that. Unfortunately, radio listeners rarely look like we want them to look. That gorgeous auburn-haired woman that you have on your sales brochure almost invariably fails to attend your focus groups. The guy who looks like he stepped off the back page of *Working Rich* somehow doesn't show up either. You see average everyday people, some with pock-marked faces, pot bellies, runs in their hose, beak noses, oily hair, and ill-fitting suits. While no one enjoys that type of presentation, it's a tremendous reality check for radio people. They are confronting some of the folks who would in all likelihood keep participate in a ratings survey. They think *Gucci* is a sound that

## **Rule Six: Know The Diarykeeper**

babies make and *Perrier* is where coyotes live in western Nebraska. The hardest part for an upscale radio executive is accepting that average listeners don't look anything like him, don't dress like him, don't talk like him, and don't sound like him. There is very little chance they would be one of his "pals." In our dementia regarding "upscale yuppies," we completely forget the masses of good, solid people who listen to American radio. Spiro Agnew was absolutely correct. He might have been talking about radio diarykeepers when he coined the term "silent majority" back in 1973.

The message here for broadcast executives is that you can put whomever you like on the cover of your sales brochure. Within the limits of creativity, come up with a representation of your ideal target listener, but don't become so obsessed with that personification that you begin programming exclusively to that individual. As has been said for years, program to the masses, not the classes. In television they call it the L.C.D. approach. That stands for lowest common denominator. The theory is based on giving viewers programs that have some element with a wide appeal. As hoary as that notion may be, there is still a lot of truth to it and it's applicable for radio as well.





## RULE SEVEN

### OWN A NICHE IN THE MARKETPLACE

When we look at a marketplace for a client who is either buying a station or has a construction permit (CP) and wants to determine the best available format, we look at four basic ingredients:

- o How benchmarks shake out in the marketplace.
- o The listeners' ability to describe stations in the market.
- o The perceived enjoyment derived from listening to particular stations.
- o The perceived length of listening for each station in the market from its core audience and how that length of listening is derived.

Basically that's how a marketplace can be taken apart from the standpoint of the listener. There are innumerable subsets to each of the categories just mentioned, but each of those four revolve, to a large extent, around listener understanding of **market positions** and radio station structure.

#### **Positioning Dominance**

Much has been made of the word "positioning" over the last several years and justifiably so. Position dominance is extremely important in the unaided recall rating process. If listeners are confused between two stations that play "rock and roll," they will generally write down the one perceived to be the leader or the best known. In some instances, the one written down probably isn't even the station actually listened to. In any given market, there are many so-called "positions" available. In the *Rules*

## **Rules of the Radio Ratings Game**

*Of The Radio Ratings Game*, it's extremely important to own one. We have this pervasive vision of John Houseman bellying up to the bar and doing a commercial for one of our country music clients: looking steadfastly at the camera he says, "We have come to dominate this particular market by playing the best available country and western music. We've beaten up this market the old fashioned way. We own it." While it is unfortunate that the commercial could never be made, it conveys the intensity with which broadcasters go after market positions.

One common scenario in so many markets today is to see at least a half dozen stations slugging it out on the "more music position," thinking that they can each share a part of that. They're wrong! As the retail world has long known, there can only be one product image leader. In a typical market, there simply are not four or five "most music positions" available. So before you jump into the "most music" fray in your market, be advised that you must be prepared to absolutely assassinate anyone else doing the same thing. If that type of assault is not possible, then don't even bother, because all you're going to do is dilute what you've already got.

### **Availability Of Image Positions**

In your market research, you can establish what image positions are available. If there is a long term market leader who is absolutely dominating a market position -- so much so that a close second doesn't exist -- you'd be well advised to steer away from that arena unless you are prepared for a long fight. The best strategy is to fill an image position that is more readily available and more indentifiable to the listener. We've mentioned the case of KRTH in Los Angeles with respect to their "trip give

## **Rule Seven: Own A Niche In The Marketplace**

away" contest position. KRTH realized that KIIS-FM in Los Angeles was a formidable competitor on the cash position and was not about to relinquish that. But the beauty of a market the size of Los Angeles is that you can have **multiple contest positions** and so KRTH took the trip position which was easier on the budget and yet exciting to the listener. The result was the establishment of a significant **benchmark** for KRTH and continued growth in market shares.

Many broadcast lessons have been learned as well about the advisability of abandoning a position. Consider the case back in the early 1980s of a major midwestern AM station. On paper they were a country radio station, but they were also a significant "contest radio station." Their *Dancing Dollars* campaign was well known locally and nationally and the station derived great ratings success from it. However, when the station began to pull back on some of the promotions, the ratings and shares dropped down to a level from which they were unable to recover. The country music format was not enough to sustain them and they lost their core audience of contest players who were loyal not to the radio station but to the contest opportunities afforded them on the station.

### **An Anatomy Of A Station Battle**

Here is a description of a typical positioning battle one can find in any top 100 market. The scenario is as follows: There is a long established three-in-a-row country FM station doing a continuous country format which they have been in for eleven years. Their shares have consistently been between 9.2 and 11.1.

## Rules of the Radio Ratings Game

Along comes a new competitor who's going to do eight-in-a-row and beat the market leader at their own continuous music game. As is so often the case after two books, the market leader's cume actually grows and the competitor barely makes a dent.

The significant question here becomes how much better is eight-in-a-row than three-in-a-row? The answer is not much, if the format leader already has a significant "in-a-row" or "more music" position. After much persistence (and in most cases considerably longer than one or two books), the challenger may begin to make some dents in the market leader's armor if the challenger is consistent. But the patience of most broadcasters (and lately, investment bankers) begins to run out long before five or six books have passed.

We have seen battles all around the country where the process goes something like this: the ten-in-a-row leader gets challenged by a station doing "twelve-in-a-row." The leader adjusts and reacts by going to "fourteen-in-a-row." Then instead of songs "in-a-row," the argument becomes one of minutes-in-a-row or maximum minutes in an hour and so it goes as they slug it out. Quite frankly, if the station sounds great, most listeners could probably care less about six-in-a-row versus four-in-a-row or ten-in-a-row versus fourteen-in-a-row. If they have a station they know and a station they like, it's going to take a station that sounds better to blast them off that spot on the dial. The simple promise of two more or three more songs an hour, in and of itself, does not matter a whole lot to most listeners unless the station just sounds so wonderful that it becomes a "must" listen (and hopefully a "must" report). The downside of "more music" warfare is that listeners often begin to anticipate times

## **Rule Seven: Own A Niche In The Marketplace**

when the station will have to load up on its spots -- and to begin consciously avoiding the station during those times.

### **How To Attack An "Owned" Position In Your Market**

#### **a. Determine if the position is readily winable.**

There are stations in this country that have been successful for a long period of time and as previously suggested, you don't simply "waltz in" and take away their positions. The first thing you should do is conduct a detailed market perceptual study to see how strong the benchmarks are in each available market position. The key thing to understand, as any military strategist will tell you, is that most battles are won before they are fought. The implication is clear here. The good military commander isolates weaknesses, finds the point in the defense where the weakest link is and attacks there. He doesn't array his forces against the part of the battlements that are loaded with the best soldiers and the most artillery. The analogy between warfare on the military battlefield or on a radio battlefield is much the same. Find out how a position can be won by isolating the situation's weaknesses. Upon doing that, move swiftly and decisively!

#### **b. If you are not prepared to play "for the duration," you can do damage to your station and whatever market position you have achieved.**

When you attack an owned position, you have to be willing to fight harder and more aggressively than the people who currently own that position. Again, the key here is pre-planning. You must determine if the position is worth waging a titanic struggle

## **Rules of the Radio Ratings Game**

over. If you are looking at a position where leadership might yield two to three million dollars a year in billings, you'd better be able to answer the question if it's worth one to two million dollars for you to take that position away from an opponent who will not lay down and welcome you with open arms. The financial ramifications must be thought out in advance. Far too often, they are not. What usually happens is a station jumps into a format fight and finds that its competitor starts throwing dollars at the wall. The action accelerates until the challenger suddenly, sickeningly realizes that its cash position is no longer tenable. That is what we mean by playing for the duration. You've got to be prepared to counter anything your opponent does, while forcing your opponent to react instead of act.

### **c. Go for the jugular.**

People pointed at the way WHTZ lambasted (at times) its music competitors in the market when it was making its Big Apple debut. Yet, from the listeners standpoint in New York City alone, it was readily proven that there were no "sacred cows." Listeners enjoyed listening to the in-fighting and began to align themselves with Z-100. The rule here is simple. As long as you are the "kid" challenging on the block, you lose nothing by mentioning the competition or by doing anything you can to dismantle them or to un-nerve and rattle them. That's much harder to do when you become the perceived market leader. Going for the jugular means using every element at your disposal to force the leader into a position they would prefer not to be in and that ultimately would prove to be less defensible.

## Rule Seven: Own A Niche In The Marketplace

We are talking here about on-air strategies. It is important to delineate between what you do on your air and what your sales staff does on sales calls. As competitive as you want to be on the air and in your advertising, it does absolutely no good to sit in a buyer's office taking pot shots at one of your competitors. To quote an old cliché, "it's bad for the medium." The fluctuation of numbers being what it is, you can often find yourself with the tables reversed within a very quick period of time. Delineate specifically when you go after your competitor, and you will be a stronger player over a longer period of time.

An interesting tactical maneuver occurred in a major market several years ago as one station mounted an "Escape from the Zoo" campaign to counter a market-leading morning zoo. The approach worked reasonably well as it took time for the leader to formulate a response. In an offshoot of that campaign, another station foiled an opponent's attempt at an "Escape the Zoo" campaign, which was a contest to send listeners on several fantasy vacations. That's going for the jugular -- and it's how positions are often won, and lost.





## RULE EIGHT

### ACHIEVE RATINGS CONSISTENCY

#### Averaging Your Books

One thing that radio broadcasters and agencies often overlook is the word "estimates" that appears on the cover of Arbitron and Birch reports. In reality, once those "estimates" are inserted into cost per thousand and cost per point formulas<sup>1</sup>, they become absolute. They are not qualified by " $\pm 5$  percent" or " $\pm 50$  percent" on either side; they are real and in black and white. So it's not too surprising that radio executives lose sight of the fact that those numbers, in theory, could really be higher or lower. The fact though, that both rating services employ samples to make inferences about larger populations, i.e., the entire market, is quite critical. It underscores the potential for book-to-book volatility and demands that an averaging approach over at least four books be taken. The averaging approach demands **patience** (that awful word again), but it aids in the retention of sanity. Otherwise, how do you explain a radio station that has made no programming changes whatsoever (in a relatively static market) going from a 4.1 to a 2.7 to a 3.9 to a 3.5 over four books? With the introduction of monthly trend reports, there's additional incentive for normally anxious radio executives to become increasingly more concerned and reactive.

Without going too deeply into a discussion of *validity* and *reliability* as they relate to broadcast ratings services, it is sufficient to say that while reliability may be acceptable, the validity (or the ability of a test to measure what it truly purports to measure) has always been a bit questionable. That's why it's critical that ratings be

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<sup>1</sup> For more information on problems in using cost-per-point, see Galen, Robert, "The CPP Myth," NAB Research and Planning, January 1988.

## Rules of the Radio Ratings Game

considered over at least four book averages. We've all seen the rather disturbing scenario of a station that drops from a 7.1 to 5.1, fires the program director only to see the new program director become the recipient of a 7.3 book. The fired program director generally talks mournfully about the situation and then announces a consultancy. Why was he or she let go at all? Because we measure our radio broadcast lives from one book to the next and we often allow outsiders to force us to do so. We rarely consider that all ratings survey numbers can "bounce" because they are dependent to a large extent on the unaided recall abilities of those who participate in the survey process. The numbers can fluctuate dramatically from any given book to another book. Over the long haul, they do tend to be reasonably steady, but it's the book to book mentality (or even the month to month mentality) that we have to address.

Let's analyze the four-book average of our example station that went from a 4.1 to a 2.7 to a 3.9 to a 3.5. As all radio executives know, there are seasonal elements that can play a large role in a rating book. Certain times of the year tend to favor certain formats over others (e.g., winter for news/talkers in northern markets) and different stations feature different programming elements that are often seasonal (sporting events). There is speculation that people actually listen and report listening a little bit differently during different times of the year as well. Once you factor out the seasonal differences, and the differences as a result of dramatic changes in the market place or programming events that are unique to certain times of the year at your station however, there are really some very simple reasons why a station's numbers go down. Here are three:

## **Rule Eight: Achieve Ratings Consistency**

- o People have made a conscious decision to stop listening to your radio station.
- o A disproportionate amount of your listeners did not get a diary, received one but did not return it, or refused to be interviewed by telephone and did not report their listening.
- o Your listeners did get a diary or did get interviewed and listened to your station among others but were unable to recall the amount of listening they did or your station's call letters with any degree of accuracy.

### **a. How Many People Have Actually Stopped Listening?**

No one likes to think that people actually stop listening to their radio station (by stop we mean on a permanent basis); the listener has made a decision that your station is not for him or her and doesn't want to listen to it anymore; indeed, he or she consciously avoids it. On a more temporal note, people stop and start listening to radio stations at the secondary level virtually every day and every hour. Let's suppose your station WBPE, to accommodate its fifty minutes an hour of music approach, is stopping twice in each final quarter hour. Not being fools, listeners soon become aware of this and avoid WBPE during that quarter hour or at least find themselves punching out of the station more often during that time period. That's what we call temporal (time-based) stopping and starting. As a rule, that's normal. It doesn't necessarily translate into disaster or celebration for any particular radio station. It's the more conscious "stopping" that can lead to station disaster. Generally, conscious movement away from a radio station occurs when the listener thinks you've done something just awful, and is aware of the fact that you don't sound like he likes you

## Rules of the Radio Ratings Game

to sound any longer. That could be a literal translation of the station's first decline from a 4.1 to 2.7. The question is simple. What went wrong? Did our station actually lose 34 percent of its listeners over a three month period? Where did they go? Will they ever come back?

Chances are, short of an absolute programming disaster, it's highly unlikely that 34 percent of your listeners will just flat out stop listening over a three month period. While it's possible, rational analysis dictates that it's unlikely.

### b. Diary Distribution

That leads to the second possibility. Acknowledge the fact that Arbitron's diary distribution "return rate" from book-to-book is inconsistent. Arbitron describes the problem in the "description of methodology" included with each market report. The actual number of diaries placed in each sampling unit is determined by the diary return target, the achieved persons per household in the sample, and the rate of return which Arbitron reasonably expects based on previous placement and return experience.<sup>2</sup> Translating this into non-research terms, what it means is that from book to book, substantial differences can exist between return rate and placement on a county-by-county basis. While this is not as great a problem with the Birch telephone methodology, the problem still exists at that level as well. People have to agree to be interviewed, have to be home, have to be reachable, and all of the other constraints that can guard against completing an interview.

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<sup>2</sup> See Arbitron Ratings Company, Description of Methodology, Laurel, MD, 1987.

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So, it is entirely possible that station WBPE's downtrend from a 4.1 to a 2.7 over that one book could have been a result of the fact that their key zip codes were insufficiently sampled to build a framework for that radio station. Some possible solutions to this problem are larger sample sizes and one-to-a household diary distribution. These would be major steps in guarding against "wobbles."

### **c. Diarykeepers Don't Have Enough Information About Your Station**

Another reason why WBPE's numbers could have dropped from a 4.1 to a 2.7 (aside from the fact that the station sounded terrible and drove away listeners or that its diary distribution and return rates were not up to comparable levels) is that the diaries were equally and evenly displaced and distributed, but that they happened to fall into the hands of WBPE listeners who were not top-of-mind aware of the radio station. No two listeners are alike in their ability to keep a diary. It doesn't take too much (given sampling inconsistencies and survey error) to get diaries into the hands of people who are simply not coherent regarding your radio station. The end result: you happen to get diaries in the hands of the dreaded "lost cumers" discussed earlier.

### **Ratings Have Predictable Error Margins**

Again, let's make one point particularly clear. We are not throwing brickbats at either of the ratings services. We are simply pointing out the realities of survey research as they exist and the short term effect that literally interpreting "estimates" can have. Indeed, the literal and absolute acceptance of each set of ratings numbers that come out is deeply ingrained in the American pop culture. When the national Nielsen

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numbers are published by the local newspaper, the *Cosby Show* is posted with a 28 rating and a 51 share. Nowhere in the publication does it include plus or minus 5 percent or more. When you plot actual ratings numbers for any given top 50 market while making allowances for sampling error, there can be as many as five or six radio stations that could be number one! The key thing to remember here is that one book does not a trend make. Again, we strongly advocate the use of four book averages because that's about how long it takes to do some sort of reliable measurement of what your radio station's reported audience really is.

If one were to average the four books that station WBPE had during the year, the 4.1, 2.7, 3.9 and 3.5, the numbers would average out to a 3.6. That's probably a closer indication, still within the limits of error, of what the station's numbers are. Of course, that's a small solace to the program director who was jettisoned after the "plunge" to the 2.7. The key point here is that ratings wobbles can and do occur. The best way to guard against them is to be as consistent as you possibly can. Don't load your promotional armaments into one book. Try to maintain visibility throughout the year. Try to make your station sound consistently good from day to day and endeavor to remind the listener at every possible junction when and how often he listened. Build benchmarks. Every "lost cumer" you can convert during the year will be one more hedge against the dreaded wobbles of the ratings process.

Remember that what goes down can also go up. We have seen numerous station scenarios where "victory parties" were thrown after a station climbed from a 3.1 to a 3.5 (well within the standard error for that set of numbers). A better way to deal

### **Rule Eight: Achieve Ratings Consistency**

with this is to get everyone at the radio station thinking along four book averages. This tends to remove the "feast or famine" syndrome that seems to occur each time a book is released. At the end of the year, if your four book average is up, **then** you have cause for celebration and that's the time to have a party. That notion should be instilled in all station personnel, particularly air talent who tend to view each rating book as a mini-career.





## **RULE NINE**

### **USE TELEVISION THE RIGHT WAY**

Television is perhaps the most misunderstood element in playing the radio ratings game. Too often, radio broadcasters buy TV spots for personal reasons without evaluating how they will ultimately benefit the radio station. As mentioned earlier, TV spots are often bought and scheduled as a deliberate reaction to some other move in the marketplace. Too many radio broadcasters react instead of act. And TV spots are often bought as a result of that kind of activity -- usually at a convention and usually on the basis of how the spot has performed in a couple of other markets. What we will try to accomplish here is a consistent overview of the rules as they apply to TV spots for radio stations. Based on all of our research data accumulated over the course of five years and hundreds of commercial pre-tests and post-tests, we offer the following suggestions:

- a. Should You Be On TV?**
- b. What Happens When A TV Spot Really Works?**
- c. Display The Call Letters.**
- d. One Central Theme.**
- e. Go For Frequency.**
- f. Creating An Image.**
- g. Creating The Typical Listener.**
- h. Air Talent As Spokesman.**
- i. Don't Sell Radio Like A Retail Product.**
- j. Demand The Best From Syndicators.**
- k. Re-Imaging Doesn't Occur Overnight.**

## **Rules of the Radio Ratings Game**

### **I. Always Pre-test Your TV Campaigns.**

#### **m. Pre-test Methods.**

#### **n. A Note On Direct Mail.**

#### **a. Should You Be On TV?**

Television is, without question, the most dominant social and marketing force of our times. Most of the images consumers have of today's products have been shaped and formed by television. Indeed, most current social and political phenomena have been inextricably linked with television, in one way or another. So, on the first level, the answer to whether or not your station should be on TV is an immediate yes.

But there is one critical second level issue. That is cost. The best kind of TV exposure is long term and constant which is also very expensive. In larger markets, one spot in prime time will often run into the thousands of dollars. Ironically, many radio broadcasters who preach long-term placement and consistency to their clients violate those same rules when it comes to buying TV for their stations. Simply put, a little is not enough. To derive the proper benefits from TV, you must be visible. Two weeks during one book, once a year, is not going to accomplish much in terms of image building for your station.

If your TV budget is inadequate, you probably would be much better off using billboards (which you should strongly consider in any case) and other available forms of outdoor advertising in your market.

## **Rule Nine: Use Television The Right Way**

### **b. What Happens When A TV Spot Really Works?**

The trade magazines are full of ads from TV commercial syndicators telling how their spot raised WBPE's numbers 42 percent from 1987 to 1988. While the spot may have played an integral role in the numbers gained by the radio station, most of those ads are vast over-simplifications, because TV spots do not stand alone in a vacuum. They function along with the rest of the marketing efforts of the radio station as an integrated whole in creating an image for the station. If your station doesn't sound right on the air, you could have the best TV spot known to God and man and wind up absolutely no better off than you were before.

If your station sounds good and all the marketing elements are in place, a good TV campaign can be a wonderful benefit to the radio station. That good TV spot will almost always result in a healthy *cume* growth of the radio station. One critical note: *Cume* growth is almost always a result of better reported listening for that particular radio station. Most TV spots, like good billboards, don't function as vehicles of conversion. Few people are going to dash to your radio station and turn off *L.A. Law* after seeing one of your television spots in prime time. The issue here is **reinforcement**. The good TV spot lights up the radio dial in the car and at home. It puts a flag on where you are, it makes you more identifiable and more visible. It sells your salient attributes and makes you more memorable to the listener. With the exception of brand new radio stations, TV is rarely a vehicle of **direct** conversion.

Let's remember how most people discover radio stations. They punch around the dial and they listen and talk to other people about radio. Chances are, if your station has

## **Rules of the Radio Ratings Game**

been on the air in the marketplace for a year or more, you have been cumed by numbers of people who simply don't know that they have cumed you. What an effective TV spot does for a radio station then is to unleash that station's "Lost Cume." This is not to say that a few listeners can't be "converted" and drawn to your radio station by the TV spot, but by and large most of them have already been there. The good TV spot gives them a reason to stay or at least to remember that they have tried. So when you see a station's numbers go up in the midst of a successful TV campaign realize in most cases what is really occurring is that that station is not attracting vast new hordes of listeners; rather, it is attracting attention and drawing awareness upon itself and that the listening that has been occurring to that station is finally being correctly reported.

### **c. Display The Call Letters.**

Nothing is more frustrating than watching a TV commercial for a radio station where the call letters are only up on the screen four to five seconds. The majority of radio stations do not have the kinds of institutional budgets that are available to many prime time advertisers where sheer tonnage often leads to increased product identification. With limited budgets, radio broadcasters can't afford the opportunity "to experiment." Whatever the television spot does, it must contain your call letters or dial position for literally the entire duration. The rationale for this is simple. In an ad, people need to "see" the product. In most ads for a retail product you will see the product prominently displayed throughout. That's a little difficult to do in radio. No one wants to sit there and look at a thirty second shot of the radio station or the

## **Rule Nine: Use Television The Right Way**

control booth so the product needs to be manufactured. In effect, the call letters or dial position become the visual representation of your product. They **must** be visible.

### **d. One Central Theme.**

A common mistake in TV spots for radio stations is attempting to depict every aspect of your radio station in thirty seconds. Far too often, we have seen the two stars of the morning show sitting there bringing in the entire cast of characters and also cross-plugging the jocks in the afternoon, evening, and overnight. All this tends to do is **diffuse** the major message that you are trying to create. It leaves the listener without anything to hang a handle on and probably doesn't go a long way toward creating a **benchmark** for your radio station.

If your commercial is going to star your morning personality, then it must be for his show and his show only! That's how listeners are going to see it and relate to it. As hard as he tries to sell the rest of the radio station, he will still just be selling his show. It would make sense to take advantage of that.

The successful TV spot also advances one significant benefit of listening to the radio station. What's in it for the listeners? What's the key thing about your radio station that they will walk away with? They are not going to be able to process seven or eight different messages. They will come away with one element, two at the very most; so quite simply, what's that one key benefit you are going to sell them on?

## **Rules of the Radio Ratings Game**

### **e. Go For Frequency.**

Even though radio stations, collectively, are the fourth or fifth largest TV advertisers in many markets, individual stations often run into trouble in terms of placement. The argument often comes down to one of reach versus frequency. We tell our clients when there is ever any doubt, **go for frequency**. Given the choice between one ad for my radio station in the Super Bowl and fourteen ads during adjacencies for the Late Night News, the fourteen spots is better. Research tells us that for a commercial to be effective, it must be seen a minimum of **seven** times and, as we have defined effective for a TV commercial for a radio station, the spot must cause people to remember your call letters, dial position and one of your **benchmarks**. In your perceptual research, isolate the TV preferences of your core listeners. Then buy on a high frequency in those shows. This form of "narrow-casting" will help you extract an even greater cume from this key group of reporting listeners.

### **Placement Strategies.**

Literally dozens of placement strategies are in use today. Some radio broadcasters like to "load up" at the end of a quarterly rating period on the premise that Arbitron weights are higher in the last month of the quarter. Others wait for their competitors to run the majority of their schedules so they can be relatively prominent during their runs. Still others utilize the theory of **vertical saturation** (i.e., emphasizing certain days of the week) on allegedly key diarykeeping days like Thursday and Wednesday. Some believe in the reach afforded by prime time; others buy exclusively fringe and late nights in higher frequency.

## **Rule Nine: Use Television The Right Way**

Whatever strategy your station utilizes, if your spots are going to be effective, you **must** buy a minimum of 200 gross rating points each week, and more if possible. The worst way to waste a TV budget is to be **undercapitalized**.

### **f. Creating An Image.**

We are all familiar with the term "cluster-buster." Most TV spots for radio stations are usually presented in a cluster of other well-done, big-budget ads. Unless the spot for the radio station does something truly visual, it's very likely that the spot won't be noticed and will be lost amidst the clutter of the other ads in the set. This is even more true with the advent of 15-second spots.

Radio people have attempted to develop cluster-busters in a number of different ways, but most have usually been non-productive in rating terms. We have seen a variety of extravaganzas come and go and all with about the same results. The spot gets **remembered** but the main attention of the commercial is devoted to **attention-getting** and not **station remembering**, hence while people instantly recall the spot they have a great deal of trouble successfully linking the spot to the station's call letters.

We can all remember the innumerable monkey campaigns, the sexy woman taking off her tee-shirt as the camera pans away at the last second, the old man masquerading as the DJ late at night. The spots always had high recall. They were easily remembered. But they always seemed to obscure the most critical message of all: the **station's call letters or dial position**.

## **Rules of the Radio Ratings Game**

We have nothing against cluster-busters so long as they accomplish the primary task of getting the radio station accurately identified and remembered. When you attempt to design that "ultimate spot" that breaks through video clutter in your market, always keep that in mind. Then too, make sure that in your zeal for creating a cluster-buster, you don't mistake the mission of your radio station. Nothing can be more damning to a radio station than to create a visually pleasing appeal that does not correctly identify or misstates the sound of the radio station.

### **Animation.**

Many stations have attempted to use animated spots to bust out of the visual doldrums, but many animated spots often tend to be wildly complex with a potpourri of collected images. As we have said earlier these multiple image messages often tend to diffuse the central selling point. There tend to be too many opportunities for confusion on the part of the viewer. This is particularly true if the spot has only a limited run. If your plans call for an animated spot, one thought should be paramount: keep the theme simple!

### **g. Creating The Typical Listener.**

We see many commercials that attempt to portray the prototypical listener. This usually corresponds to some notion that the station management or agency has about what station WBPE's typical listener ought to look like. As a result, we usually see people busily engaged in some lifestyle activity; jogging, tennis, driving around in a Porsche 911 with the wind blowing sinfully through their hair. They are attractive,



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deliriously happy people. The women are usually knock-outs -- the men are right out of *Esquire* or *GQ*.

It is easy to understand why this approach prevails. Retailers use it to sell jeans, perfumes, cars, and a host of other "lifestyle items." Where radio advertisers make mistakes is not seeing that retailers use people to sell their products. When a station attempts a "lifestyle -- typical listener spot," it is usually much harder for the radio listener to understand what the station is trying to sell. Simply because we see a variety of classy people meandering around on the screen, what does that really tell us about the music on our radio station? Then too, many listeners take offense at the creation of a "personality type" that they can't relate to whatsoever. Showing them something they could never become might make them want to experience a vicarious relationship with a pair of new jeans, but it's more likely to turn them off when talking about "their" radio station.

### **h. Air Talent As Spokesman.**

As we mentioned earlier, it is very difficult for a radio station to get some notion of its "product" on the air without looking like an ad for a record store or a company that sells specialty albums on television. It is always good to have some sort of visual person identification in the campaign because consumers do like to look at people. The question is should you use your own air talent on television? The answer is a very qualified "it depends."

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Unfortunately, not all disc jockeys look like they sound. They may have a great morning radio show but that has nothing to do with establishing a visual image. Indeed, with many personalities, TV exposure actually breaks down some of the "mystery" that often exist in the typical listener/DJ vicarious relationship. On the other hand, many DJs are very effective on television, look good, and can create a compelling message for your radio station. The bottom line is to remember that it's TV. First and foremost, the TV spot has to be enjoyable to look at. If your morning talent can fulfill that goal, then you should give some serious thought to using that particular campaign.

### **i. Don't Sell Radio Like A Retail Product.**

Remember, because radio is free and there are no financial sanctions, listeners will "sample" stations far more readily and easily than they will sample new retail products. The key is not so much in getting them to sample, but getting them to **remember** that they did and to readily identify with the radio station as a product source. Suppose you design a TV spot to sell a retail product, for example, soap. Once the soap has been sold, the main job of the commercial has been accomplished. To make that analogy to radio however, the process has only just begun. **Every time** a listener tunes in to your station, be it the result of a TV spot or not, in strict retail terms, a "sale" has been made. Unfortunately, the issue then becomes whether the radio station actually gets credit for that sale or not and this is where the TV spot becomes particularly critical. The typical retail TV spot "asks for the order" throughout, but the TV spot for radio must assume that the order has already been placed. Don't waste time asking for business. Instead, educate listeners and help them

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remember that they listened. That's a fundamental difference between most retail spots versus radio spots.

### **j. Demand The Best From Syndicators.**

An advertising campaign that worked in Des Moines does not guarantee its success in Sacramento. While there are number of excellent providers of syndicated TV commercials out there, they all have to deal in volume. The key is getting the product sold and sold quickly. Sometimes, local stations, unless they are careful, can get lost in the lurch. Make sure if you choose a syndicated spot that you pre-test it in your marketplace. Make sure the "feel" of the spot matches the mood that your station creates in the marketplace. Make sure the syndicator gives you a commercial that "sounds like" and "looks like" what research reveals a portrait of your radio station to be.

### **k. Re-Imaging Doesn't Occur Overnight.**

Radio broadcasters often put on a TV campaign with hope of creating an instant new identity for their radio station. That is a time-consuming process if your station has any degree of longevity in the marketplace. Research horror stories from around the country point to stations that 2 1/2 to 3 years after changing format, are still dominantly identified by their prior format. We have all seen the country station or the adult contemporary station that switched to Top 40 only to still have to fight the lingering vestiges of past images.

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If you want to eradicate your station's old image, the first thing you must do is destroy any link to it. You must start clean. The call letters must be changed, dial references must be changed, anything that images the station toward the old regime must be blown up. In the TV campaign, don't reference the fact that "you have changed." That will simply confuse people. Start fresh. Simply start talking about this brand new radio station. New is still a word that American radio listeners are in love with (indeed in any radio market around the country, one can find anywhere from two to three "new FMs" fighting that image game).

### 1. Always Pre-test Your TV Campaigns.

The man many consider to be the guru of modern-day advertising, David Ogilvy, once said that the most effective word in the vocabulary of advertising is "test." Despite spending hundreds of thousands of dollars on TV campaigns, many radio stations have been reluctant to spend even a fraction of that to pre-test the campaign to make sure it passes the criteria for a successful TV spot.

Good pre-test research will enable you to use three criteria for each television spot that must be judged:

- Is the spot enjoyable?
- Does it make people remember or learn something about your station that will help you write them down in the diary?
- Does it communicate clearly to the listener what your station does?

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If a TV spot does not pass muster on any one of these items, one should give serious thought about not committing any dollars whatsoever to a full campaign.

### **m. Pre-test Methods.**

There are any number of pre-test methodologies in use by research companies today. They range from simple focus groups to more advanced groups where listeners are equipped with moment-to-moment electronic devices to mall intercepts to one-on-one interviews to confrontation analysis. While we would suggest eliminating the basic focus group completely as a vehicle for pre-testing TV spots, good cases can be made for any of the other methodologies mentioned. If you are considering a syndicated commercial, it is relatively easy to test that commercial as it appeared in other markets. Obviously, the best and most usable feedback comes from commercials already in the can, but it's not always possible or financially feasible to go to that extent for a new commercial that is still on the drawing board. This is where testing story boards or concept boards can be quite useful. They are quite simply an artist's rendering of the basic elements of the commercial. The concept board is the most basic element which essentially lays out the the main theme out in several panels. A story board is more detailed, literally providing an almost shot by shot rendering of how the commercial will progress. In either case, while enjoyment of a final spot is more difficult to evaluate, the validity of the concept being tested and the clarity with which it communicates can certainly be looked at. The appropriateness of subject matter as it relates to your radio station and the image you are trying to construct can certainly be examined. The language of the spot itself can also be looked at.

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Let's suppose you have a talk radio station and your agency comes to you with some story boards that have to do with a parrot on the shoulder of one of the talk show hosts as the central theme for the "let's talk about it" campaign. One does not need to go to full produced commercial to evaluate the acceptance of the parrot as the main image for the station. Indeed, concept boards are probably very appropriate in that scenario.

We recommend that if you are planning on spending \$50,000 or more on television in any calendar year that you devote some percentage of that to making sure you are getting the best spot that your money can buy. While no research can guarantee that your spot will ultimately be a "smash hit" in the marketplace, what good research can do is diminish the possibility of you being stuck with a significant turkey which presents you with a no-win scenario. A strategic example: one leading syndicator recently designed a very nice beautiful music spot for a very successful easy listening station in a Top 15 market. The spot was pre-tested using story boards and presented the listeners with several variations. The basic theme however, was to create a new meaning for those listeners who associate easy listening with "elevator music" and "dentist office music." To that end, they "brought the elevator to life." What the spot was attempting to do was to detoxify a loaded term like "elevator music."

Initial research results were encouraging. People enjoyed the spots and thought they were fun, but upon a closer examination, one significant negative emerged. Core listeners of the easy listening station simply didn't use the words "elevator" or "dentist office music." It didn't occur in their vocabulary; they called the station

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"easy listening" or "my music." People who were non-listeners of the format used the word "elevator" extensively but the research did not indicate that such an approach would increase their reported listening. What it did indicate was that it would possibly add "elevator" as a vocabulary word to core listeners who are extremely vocal and supportive of the radio station.

The challenge was significant. Do you risk adding a negative word in the vocabulary of probably the most rock solid of all formatic cores, the easy listener, for the purpose of reaching out for new come? Research enabled the client to make the difficult decision to pass on a great spot at the risk of adding negative vocabulary to an already music-intensive listener. It's an interesting example of the types of problems and questions that research can help clients address.

### **n. A Note On Direct Mail.**

Even though this chapter has been devoted to television campaigns, direct mail deserves to be discussed because of the volume of use that it's getting in radio today. Direct mail is viewed by many radio broadcasters as a panacea of sorts. Indeed, several direct mail campaigns have claimed some very impressive numbers for the stations involved. Like TV, direct mail is expensive. While there may have been visible successes, not every campaign has hit a home run.

When a radio listener receives a mailer from your station (along with the other pieces of junk mail he or she receives daily), one of three things can happen. He or she can (most likely) discard it unopened. The listener can glance at it and then pitch it (also

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likely). He or she can also read it, react to it, and participate. In the direct mail business, if your return rate is above four percent, you're considered the Babe Ruth of the industry. So, let's suppose that your mailers make it into three percent of your households and that those listeners play along with either "The Incredible Prize Catalogue" or "Your Check's in the Mail." Can three percent make a difference? Absolutely: often as much as one and one-half to two share points. But that's optimal. Remember, most direct mail campaigns don't even approach those numbers. So what we have is a crap-shoot, a roll of the dice. If they're rolling your way, the results, both in terms of cume and quarter hours, can be significant. If the dice grow cold, or the market is glutted with direct mail pieces by other radio stations, the results can be disappointing.

If the excessive cost can be liquidated or absorbed, direct mail should certainly be investigated as a marketing option. Do realize that there are no guarantees. If the mailer fails to achieve the necessary penetration, the campaign can be doomed. If the mailer reaches the acceptable number of households, the approach seems to work rather well.



## CONCLUSION

Research has often been characterized as an entity that has almost completely ruined the radio business, divested it of its spontaneity, and turned all of us into walking and talking automatons who do little more than spout endless regurgitations of the latest variation of "favorites of the 60s, 70s and 80s."

That is simply not true. While some may have gone overboard and developed a pervasive sense of "test mania," most radio groups and stations have struck a healthy balance between science and emotion, between listening to the listener and listening to the program director.

And who's to say radio was so great before the advent of research? Ever listened to a tape of a late 60s Top 40 station? Funny how the good old days always get better with the passage of time. But the truth is, radio is now more of a business than it ever was, and stations must deliver precise and responsive demos. If the music sounds a trifle predictable, it's just that the stakes are so much higher. The stations that followed the latest Moody Blues record with the current hit from Prez Prado simply don't exist anymore. Perceptual research didn't kill them; ratings did!

That's really the point of this book. We are all bound by the constraints of a system we didn't design. That's all the more reason to use to our advantage what research tells us about the typical listener.

The "rules" that affect radio ratings are simple and logical. What broadcasters truly have to understand is that the old axiom "if you can't beat 'em, join 'em" is quite

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true for the medium. The ratings, in one form of unaided recall or another, will be with us for years. There is no point in fighting that. Instead, maximize your ratings potential. Help create a positive ratings environment at your station. Use the "rules" in the spirit in which they were written: as a guideline for insuring that you get credit for all the listening you actually deserve. The rules should not infringe on any program or promotion director's creativity; rather, as good research will also do, they should facilitate the process!

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Robert E. Balon is president of the Benchmark Company of Austin, Texas. Over the past seven years, the Benchmark Company has done research for over 300 radio stations as well as conducting national radio studies. Rob has worked in the industry as a talk show host and has also spent time working in ad agencies, as a speechwriter, and as a university professor. He holds a Ph.D. from the University of Michigan.







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