

Continuity Scheduling: Close-up spots and a lesson from Dirty Harry

by Franklin Raff

You could learn a lot from a homicidal vigilante. Take Dirty Harry. He would have made a great local radio rep. An impassioned dealmaker, he was *the* master of the assumed close. One would not look for wiggle room in Dirty Harry's rate card. One would not try to add the word 'flavorific' to Dirty Harry's ad copy. Dirty Harry's sales proposals do not include an "Option B". Dirty Harry was a conspicuously proactive problem-solver. And I wish he worked for us, 'cause *man* have we got problems.

From a creative standpoint, for instance, we often find ourselves at a point of seemingly irreconcilable compromise. On one hand, we must give 'establishing' information in our radio ads: business name, location, phone number—yes, repeated—website and legal. Innumerable surveys and recall tests show that radio listeners *need* this information, and are frustrated by omissions.

But we must also craft the 'close-up' moments, the really *creative* radio that people *want* to listen to. Now that many stations think nothing of running as many as 18 spots per hour, great programming includes compelling *ad* content.

But just as minor salespeople will try to quick-close an all-encompassing 'radio advertising partnership package,' so do many creatives try to tackle all content objectives in a single spot. The end result is often the same: contracts, credibility, and the clients' best interests are ultimately compromised.

We have (I think) coined a phrase in our attempt to arrive at a responsible and radiocentric solution to the close-up/establishing dichotomy of the radio ad. We call it continuity scheduling. Naturally, we got the idea from watching Dirty Harry.

In order to ensure clear and powerful storytelling, Hollywood relies on a system of filmmaking rules called 'continuity editing.' This system is now so pervasive that anyone who works in narrative film is expected to be thoroughly familiar with its principles. The '180 degree rule,' for instance, dictates that a movie camera must always

remain on one side of a 180 degree axis of action. Now let's get back to Dirty Harry. First, we see an 'establishing' shot: The villain is to the left of the screen, facing Harry on the right. The axis of action is set: bad guy left, good guy right. In the next shot we see the bad guy, screen left, reach for his gun. Cut to a close profile of Harry drawing from the left hip, and aiming towards screen left. Bang! And cut to close profile of the anguished bad guy facing right. Now another close-up: Harry's smoking gun, whose barrel—you guessed it—faces left.

Close-up shots lend emotional impact: the wincing face, the smoking gun. But close-ups would disorient us if it weren't for the 180 degree rule. Continuity editing brings coherency to the montage, regulating a dynamic of emotional power and intellectual consistency.

So it is with continuity scheduling, a system comprised of establishing spots and close-up spots. An establishing spot is the information-based calling card. It is designed to run exclusively and at high frequency in the first months (depending on frequency, one to three months) of a radio campaign, after which this frequency wanes, keeping continued presence in all dayparts as close-up spots are introduced. Establishing spots are always in the mix, though they may decrease to as little as one play per daypart/day after six months as close-up spots supercede them in the rotation.

An establishing spot should be engaging and versatile—the listener gets the facts and is pre-prepared, or aurally and mentally keyed in, for future close-up spots. An establishing spot is neither a 'generic' spot, nor a sixty-second tag. Rather, it sets a fact-filled 'line of action,' optimizing transference via audio and copy continuity.

For the anxious new client, the establishing spot offers a particularly gentle introduction to radiocentricity. Call it the Montessori effect: By transferring existing creative (usually from print) to audio, radio multiplies an audience while luring the client from other media with new creative opportunities. In this way, and at a

critical time, we show that our remarkably un-trackable medium cannot, at this point, be tested. Rather, it is *their* sales message that is simply tested on a new audience. And so, until 'radio starts to work' as we so nervously say, the 'message effectiveness' onus is largely on the client.

Continuity scheduling also serves as a deliberate enticer. As we gather critical establishing frequency while tramping through the painful first invoices of a radio campaign, we work with our clients to polish up the fun stuff—the close-ups. And as we help mold our clients' best ideas into radiocentric ideas, we usually find that radio, the imagination medium, gets their best attention. Reaching over 95% of consumers weekly, only radio can paint a million different pictures in a million different minds in the space of a minute. And though the folks at *Creativity or Lürzers Archive* may haughtily reboot *Photoshop* at the very thought, America (and some of her best creatives) are still *deeply* in love with our medium. It's just *more fun* to listen, and think, and write, radiocentrically.

As we prepare for the infusion of the close-ups, we find we have a well-established foundation. Our listeners know *who* we are, and they're ready to know *why* we are. Keeping that axis of action—thematic continuity—we unleash the fun stuff. The soundbite montage. Or, say, a child's testimonial: wonderfully unhurried and exhilaratingly real. As long as it serves as a memorable, penetrating, and persuasive superstructure to the establishing spot, it is appropriate.

The close-up spot has no need for the wearisome, endless tags that steal credibility from our advertisers and TSL from our stations. Liberated from contrivance, the close-up spot can do what our intimate medium does best: show a *real* selling proposition, show us the *soul* of a business. The close-up spot is a positioning tool, but it is also an act of generosity, an oasis of authenticity that compliments, serves, and ignites the imagination of the listener.

Continuity scheduling solves a basic creative problem while making it



mandatory—at last from a creative standpoint—that radio advertisers never sacrifice frequency for reach. Continuity scheduling sets creative roots deep in the minds of a listenership. As such, it demands an unrelenting commitment to longer schedules and higher overall frequency values.

Continuity scheduling entices a wary client, insures against premature contract cancellations, catalyzes agent-client creative efforts, and is rocket fuel for up-selling. And though there's lots of room for improvement, the general idea is working for us and our clients.

Emotional power and intellectual consistency are the dynamic yin and yang of continuity scheduling. In this delicate balance, there is little room for compromise.

So if you would be a shotgun scheduler, a sprayer and prayer, or an ad sprinkler—if you would rather do and say a little of everything all at once—if you think it's safer to make the same old apologies for the same old results, safer to stand by and let your client decrease radio in a "down" month, safer not to try something new; if you really think it's safer to settle for declining nationwide audience shares, disrespect from traditional agencies, and our minuscule portion of the nationwide ad dollar, you'd better stop and ask yourself: Do you feel lucky?

Franklin Raff is the President and Executive Creative Director of Raff Radio Marketing Group, Inc.; franklin@raffradio.com