
RBR's Daily Morning Epaper

HOW NOT TO GO GENTLE INTO THAT GOOD NIGHT

Honest Assessments, Promising Ideas, and Raging Leadership in radio's critical phase.

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By Franklin Raff

Our job is to make and market a live, creative audio product. David Ogilvy's old mantra - that creative people are the foremost assets of a creative business - is only a profit-unfriendly concept in the very short term. The short term, for us, is over. Our customers - captive listeners, and, in turn, advertisers - wait like babushkas on a bread-line for some semblance of compelling content. The golden eggs are dwindling and it's time to feed the geese. That is to say, in order to improve our manufacturing potentiality, we must reevaluate and optimize the talents and capacities of our people. When you have finished reading this article, you will at worst have a few concrete, if unconventional, views and ideas in your mind about how to do this on the cheap. In the process, I aim to provoke and inspire you to action.

What kind of a person were you when you first got into radio? I'll bet you wanted to make a difference, you wanted a creative outlet, and you needed money. You became a performer. Perhaps you were initially attracted by life on the air, as I was, but found performing in the production studio, the boardroom, and the client's office just as much fun. As I do. But at some point, you had a choice and you chose

radio. You chose it, you stuck with it, and now you define it. Do you believe that your successors are as bright as you were, or have the same inherent options, based on their talent, training, upbringing, passion, discipline and drive, that you did? Answer quietly.

«Forget it.» That's what the OM of Yale's college radio station said to me during the latest of my annual summer calls for promising graduates. «The kids just aren't interested in radio anymore.» Indeed most of the great «old» college FMs, the last tooth-cuttin' torchbearers of the free-form programming revolution of the sixties and seventies, have been NPR'd, PRI'd, PSI'd and LMA'd out of any singular existence. Medium - I-pod, broadband wireless - seems a greater fascination for us and for the enterprising souls who once manned our talent-farms than content itself. Is that any surprise, when HAL and the Robojocks have been «entertaining» our heirs for the past decade? A friend at SONY Music told me recently that Seventh Avenue - the fashion trade - is for the first time widely considered a more effective «hitmaker» and music selling tool than radio itself. People Sell People, you see. Radio stations don't have personalities. People do. And over time, as legions of end-of-quarter, out-of-town consultants touted «stationality», our people vanished.

Some high dollar statistics-jockeys say radio is not losing national audience share and ad dollars to innumerable media competitors. The RAB, for instance, may tell you everything is hunky-dory. But your daughter has never heard of the RAB. She may

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never have voluntarily tuned in to a terrestrial radio station, and what is more, you probably gave her an XM or ipod unit for Christmas. So why aren't you filthy rich? Because the FCC hasn't fought hard enough to control intramural competition? Because radio reps can't get our overextrapolating yes-mens' glossy-print messages across to advertisers? Of course not. It is because our own children don't listen to the radio anymore. Ask them why and they'll tell you. «Get real. Radio sucks.»

So when you ask yourself where all the bright kids went, remember: This generation will not have grown up with radio. No Zeniths under the sheets. Night moves by the dashboard lights are now illuminated by LCD: Side2-LedZepIV-Mp3, at best. Radio is «old» to our elseways replacements: our blinking towers are not symbols of excitement, mystery, romance, wealth, and possibility, as they have always been to me. To our successors they are crumbling monuments to a bygone era of oppressive commercial content and limited choice.

It's time to clean up the mess we made when we cookie-cuttered our creatives, de-incentivized our hottest reps, and otherwise robbed our most purposeful people of their very purpose. We have to get people like us back. To do that, we must re-instill, in our industry, what attracted us to begin with: Freedom. Creative and journalistic power. Fun. Unpredictability. The good news is that we are perfectly positioned, strategically, to make this transition. It may not matter to you that net-shocked newspapers, plagued by an expensive and inexcusably slow medium (paper/press), are laying off future radio employees. It may not matter that outdoor can't win hearts or that the Yellow Pages can't pre-seal a purchasing decision or that radio is the only cost-effective internet and commute-friendly

advertising and information-delivery medium on the planet. What matters most, in a time requiring foxhole creativity and dramatic action, is that we have absolutely nothing to lose.

Media fortune-tellers, for whom Negroponte is Nostradamus, hail always-on, full-band, global interactive access as an endgame assimilator- leaving radio in the margins of a postapocalyptic media graveyard shift: the redefinition, distribution, and management of whatever inventory we can scrounge, peddle, and stuff into a hot-clock. Many industry professionals believe we can make lemonade from these rinds. They are dead wrong, and they have forgotten radio's unique selling proposition. The way out of this mess is in our blood. Everybody knows we need to «get local» - to deliver live, exciting, imaginative, unpredictable, target-focused content - in order to win. We have always known it. «Local» is the only USP terrestrial radio outfits ever had. The laws of positioning affirm it's the perfect USP in an increasingly «global» network media environment - and radio is the most quickly produced, easily delivered media widget in the world! So why are jocks in top-ten markets staring at TV monitors? Why haven't we capitalized on the disenfranchisement of the thousands of newspapermen who would come over to radio in a heartbeat and for pennies, if only our hot-clocks gave 'em a chance? Why is every cell phone not a Marti: why don't we give out prizes for the best phone-fed / listener submitted audio? Why do we still load PIs into endless spot sets as if we expected our listeners to skim, search, and seek themselves out of terrestrial radio listening habits once and for all? Why, at the very least, aren't we making «news» out of our local advertisers' interests? There are scores of cost-effective ways to put your finger on the pulse of your market. Radio is immediate. Observe the sunrise. Think of a new way to please your listeners. Implement by sunset.

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Radio desperately needs local leadership, our advertisers need improved results, and our best reps, GMs, PDs, and SMs need to stop blaming their paltry incomes on «The Industry» we ourselves control. So:

Get that ridiculous print agency graphics job off your desk. We paint our pictures with words. Remember what all the boneheads wrote in the industry trade journals between planning meetings with syndicators, jock-automators, network-'news'feeders and audio hard-drive backer-uppers? Starts with «get». Ends with «local.» Getting Local is an exercise in circumstantial relevance, and does not necessarily indicate any sort of geographical area. Local isn't always where your best listener lives, but it always encompasses topics and themes he cares about. That's why the newsgathering power of the internet is the best thing that ever happened to local radio. Use the 'net - portals like freerepublic, worldnetdaily, drudgereport - and let your plugged-in listeners help you break local news and national news of local import before your competitors do. By giving them friendly «source» credit and kudos from time to time on the air, you can simultaneously appropriate what draws millions to the blogosphere. Google has an infinite-source «custom news» feature that will blow your socks off: Do you work in coal country? The 'net offers 5 new coal stories of one kind or another every day. (They're making diesel out of in Canada - like the Nazis did). Chicago? New research out of Norway on the «death-cycles» of large freshwater lakes. Catch my drift? Radio, because of its negligible preproduction time, can vet, produce, and get to air faster and with a broader scope than anyone. And if you can't grasp the mandate, hire a local journalism grad with theater experience and as much history in his head as you

can muster. Give him a cellphone, a laptop, and a portable radio. Give him pride and freedom, and send him out on the street. His job is to file :30 or :60 stories every few hours, with a backup or two and an evergreen loaded (via VM?) by 0700. Can't find your man? Try this:

LOTS OF FOLKS WILL TELL YOU THAT YOU HAVE TO BE POOR IN ORDER TO ENJOY TOTAL CREATIVE FREEDOM IN YOUR JOB. THEY ARE WRONG. THIS JOB INVOLVES NO CUBE-TIME, NO SUCKING-UP, NOT A SINGLE FILE CABINET. WE NEED CULTURAL LITERACY, IMPROVISATIONAL BRILLIANCE, A GOOD ACADEMIC TRACK RECORD, PASSION FOR NEWS, KNOWLEDGE OF THE TOWN, AND FEARLESSNESS. WE'RE WXXX RADIO. THERE ARE NO RULES OR INSTRUCTIONS. THINK OF AN UNUSUAL WAY TO APPLY FOR YOUR NEW CAREER WITH US AS AN ON-AIR JOURNALIST. WE ARE WAITING TO HEAR FROM YOU. EOE. /30

«No time to interrupt the hits», you say? Ask radio legend Bill Drake about The Great CKLW's top-40 news department. And before you scoff, study that station's mind-boggling ratings history over the course of twenty tears and half as many markets. «Too expensive», you say? Bogus. Your new employee's salary, car, gas, and equipment should be a fraction of the sponsorship value. If you can't make that happen, ask Chris Lytle for a refresher course, slither down to a more comfortable market, or tell your dapper little middle manager to buzz off for a quarter while you rescue the industry. Best-case scenario? See if you can blow out the middle manager. Take one-fifth his dough and hire someone twice as talented, right out of college, who doesn't know how to pronounce the letter «W». Get a decent web-stream set up (you need to establish it - no time to explain here) and give the rest to that print agency

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or some other aspiring charity. Give your new star the speech on pronouncing «W» and «Neeews», pepper some war stories with call letters, drink a bottle of lousy scotch together, pass the torch, and go home.

Tomorrow you can ask your daughter if she heard about how trigonometry is basically «out» according to all the top math teachers and professors, and that the «old math» is, you know, like, being trashed and half the math teachers in the country are TOTALLY clueless and still assigning trig homework. Hadn't you heard? It was on the radio.

The bleeding has stopped. You have secured new competitive advantages in a new media environment, you have optimized the unique selling proposition of a terrestrial tower-based audio content provider. You, the maker and seller of an audio widget, have catalyzed a revolution in HR and manufacturing models. Moreover, in an era in which radio stations and groups once alternately screwed and benchmarked - chased - each other like lemmings copulating en route, you changed direction first in your market. Ries and Trout were right, after all: category leadership, no matter how tumultuous the pole position may be at first, ensures a legacy of commercial success. Your people are both hungry and fulfilled, your ratings and revenue are on the way up, and you can start having fun again.

Phew! That was a close call.

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