

A Guy's View Of The Radio World

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employ people who can spot talent at an early age and foster that talent's growth. With so much on our plate, it's difficult to find the time to spot the future talent in our business. I know it's difficult for me to find the time, so I can imagine how hard it is for a PD who is in charge of every detail of the three radio stations he programs or oversees.

I think back about my own start in this business and realize how many talented people weren't lucky enough to have the opportunities that I had to succeed and the people along the way who helped me. Any success I've had has been achieved through collaboration with hundreds of incredible people and the kindness of so many people who mentored me and gave me the opportunity to be in this wonderful business.

FIVE MISTAKES

Most of the memorable losses I've seen in the business are so obvious to outsiders. Amazingly, the people involved seem to be oblivious to the truth. It's the old "can't see the forest for the trees" problem. These mistakes generally happen in one of a few ways:

Mistake No. 1: The operator doesn't understand the opportunity or comes in with a preconceived plan. The operator, many times, also doesn't understand the history of the radio station and the frequency he's going to launch it on. He often follows conventional industry wisdom instead of knowing what the station and frequency stand for to the listener and fails to deliver on that expectation.

Elaborating on Mistake No. 1, with all due respect to Al Ries and Jack Trout, I hereby offer the 23rd Immutible Law: "Delivering to Expectation." This is the rule that's most often broken in our business.

The WRBQ (Q105) vs. WFLZ (Power Pig) war in Tampa in the late '80s was a pretty obvious example. WRBQ spent years cultivating a dominant image with adults through a carefully dayparted music mix, a killer morning show, excellent traffic and news, an oldies lunch program and other distinctive elements. It would have been simple for Q105 to segue to a Hot AC position, but instead it decided to defend the CHR/Pop position by protecting its youth base.

The Power Pig was new and hip and owned the 15-24 audience in Tampa. Q105's decision to fight for an audience that was not its core meant it no longer delivered to the expectations of its key audience, which drove the adults away. WRBQ eventually flipped to "Young Country."

In Phoenix, KZZP was a double-digit radio station for two years, holding off competitors KOY-FM (Y95) and KKFR for most of that time. KZZP was incredibly well-branded as the original "No. 1 Hit Music Station." When the station eventually dipped to a 9.0 share, management decided that it was more important to protect the 25-54 adults it had, even though the station had always been a cutting-edge CHR. So KZZP went Hot AC, fired longtime morning hosts Bruce Kelly and Maggie Brock and allowed Y95 to have the CHR position.

KZZP fell to a 3.0 within six months. Even then, KKFR and Y95 were only a share ahead of it. To this day I still see companies come into a market and believe that they can keep heritage calls, make format adjustments and expect grand improvements. Based on these scenarios, that's a difficult task.

Mistake No. 2: The operator goes in with a weak plan and doesn't have all three of the three M's on target. Music, mornings and marketing all have to be outstanding for a radio station to be a long-term success. Mistake No. 2 occurs when a radio station believes it can be successful when

only two-thirds of the three M's are being done right.

A lot of the Rhythmic Oldies stations are perfect examples of this, in that they start out with a great musical product, but after a six-month plateau they suddenly drop. A great many of them don't have a strong marketing campaign to kick off the radio station, and, as a result, they don't reach a wide enough awareness level early enough in the game to create the new product excitement that leads to a large P1 audience. Many stations don't have great morning shows, or they change them so many times that the audience becomes uncomfortable.

Mistake No. 3: The company is so big that no one knows there is a problem before a ratings drop happens. The truth gets filtered through a bunch of company middlemen, and

Successful ideas require time for brainstorming, which also requires as many ideas as possible upfront.

the decisionmaker never hears the whole story or possibly never hears the story at all. I see a lot of this happening as companies get so big that middlemen "manage" the information and the owner or president never understands what is truly going on.

That's one of the main reasons the right consultants are valuable. It takes a lot of balls to tell the CEO that their baby is ugly, something that's not often said by the Group PD, since they are part of the process. I see remarkable consultants like Fred Jacobs tell the brutal truth no matter what the consequences might be because their job is to inform and coach and help a company foster success. If a station doesn't win, we get fired anyway.

The problem with any big company is that the minute it goes from workers and boss to a multilayered company, it becomes a political organization. To paraphrase Tom Peters, "The secret will be knowing how many people and layers you have before you get too far removed from the front." The man who creates a successful business must always have the time to go down to the front lines to talk to the customer. If there are too many distractions or too many layers, the business loses touch with the consumers and fails.

Mistake No. 4: The world isn't black and white, it's gray. I see misuse of research more and more, as well as limitations on interpretation and implementation of a radio station's product. Market perceptuals are being used to lay out every detail of a radio station's product, a strategy that will stifle creativity. I see many companies attempting to flesh out every aspect of a radio station's product with perceptual research. I'm a big fan of perceptual research and have been the point person in assembling hundreds of such projects for our clients. They have been a big part of a great many radio station success stories.

However, market perceptuals can only form a strategy skeleton, in that they are great for measuring attitudes and images. Perceptual research is a rearview mirror the day after its completion and has severe limitations as you project into the future. It is very hard to measure emotions with science. We must realize that tastes and attitudes regarding entertainment appear so simple but are in such complex combinations in our world.

It takes a combination of experienced veterans who have seen it all and understand the practical applications of this data and young lions with fresh outlooks who

aren't jaded by experience and aren't afraid to break away from the past. This balanced team must be relied on to discuss, interpret and put the details into practice with a workable action plan.

Mistake No. 5: The removal of entry-level jobs, airshifts and company "farm clubs" in smaller markets through consolidation. This is a move that severely limits the opportunities for creative ideas and creative people. Certainly, one of the biggest problems that will eventually contribute to radio losses is the advent of "hard drive" and syndicated daily programming, along with the reduction of local talent.

Companies are creating cookie-cutter solutions in an effort to turn bigger profits year after year to satisfy Wall Street. Right now syndication is an incredible way to make money with a reduced bottom line, as well as instantly improve the programming and talent level in a lot of large, medium and small markets. These stations hurt their direct competitors (and sometimes even win).

So, you ask, what's the bad news? These radio stations aren't very good at being local, and they drastically reduce the opportunities for young talent to learn their craft. We are losing the farm teams as we lose the overnight and weekend shifts where young air talent can learn, make mistakes, take risks and hone their craft. Our future on-air entertainers have to have an outlet to experiment with their style and content.

We are chasing potential creative minds for radio to the Internet, where they can be experimental and creative without answering to anyone and can simply do a better job than we can of entertaining their peers. On our current path, radio will come full circle and wind up where it was during the early years, with national radio networks and syndication supplying much of the programming and very limited quality local programming.

The next 10 years in our business will mark the time of greatest change since radio began. With more and more cost-cutting measures to satisfy Wall Street, you'll see a mass exodus of many creative minds from radio. The resulting homogenization of radio programming, reduced creativity and huge spotloads are sending more and more passionate listeners in search of new providers of entertaining content.

The Internet may be an even bigger attraction for our future audio and visual creative talent by presenting an amazing opportunity for these people to take ownership of and expose their talents to a wide audience. The good news is that the Internet and satellite radio will create a great many new jobs as they look for ways to service their current listeners and create a new audience.

Survival Island

Jeremy Rice

PD, WBLI/Nassau-Suffolk

If you were about to be stranded on a desert island and had to choose one record company exec and one local record promoter to be stranded with, who would they be?

Charlie Walk, because he would find a Nobu somewhere on the island, and Damon Cox from Universal.

If you could only take five CDs with you, what would they be?

Dido's No Angel, Depeche Mode's Violator, Miles Davis (any), New Order's Substance and The Cure's Standing on a Beach.

If you had to take one indie with you, who would it be?

Barry Resnick. We would open the island's best kosher deli.