

Up Your Ratings

Leading Edge Information You Can Use to Increase Ratings,
Get a Raise and Have More Fun

SCR
International

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Commercial Break Length: Long—or Short?

We've discussed the controversy over how to program commercial breaks before.

Remember: PPM results tell us that instant tune-out because of commercials is not an issue. At least it doesn't seem to be able to create a difference in how long each average listen to the station is.

And remember as well that there is other evidence that long commercial breaks is a bad idea.

At Texas Tech they tried an experiment. As I understand it, they exposed their test subjects to music listening in two ways:

Lots of songs in a row followed by a long commercial break
Songs in shorter groups, but with shorter commercial breaks

The results:

Older listeners (25+) preferred the second option, with shorter commercial breaks.

Younger listeners (18-24) showed no difference in their attitude toward the two approaches.

Observation:

Every properly done study points to shorter, more frequent breaks, particularly with breaks limited to no more than 2 minutes. This study also points us in that direction.

About SCRI

Steve Casey Research International specializes in helping stations increase ratings. Our contribution is highly effective research and communications between listeners and the station programming team. We help you obtain frequent and accurate feedback from your listeners.

Most consultants show up with opinions. SCRI brings you leading edge tools. We make available to our clients the most advanced music research tools in radio and over 40 years of experience using and perfecting those tools at many of the most successful stations, in more than 100 radio markets around the world.

We've been honored to provide our help to exceptional broadcasters like the Australian Radio Network, TV2 Radio (Denmark), Mango (India), CanWest (New Zealand, Turkey), Cox (USA), CBS (USA), NRJ Group (France), Chrysalis (UK), Start Group (France), Millennium (India), Primedia (South Africa, Israel), SBS (United States, Puerto Rico), Finelco (Italy), GMG (UK), SBS (Sweden, Denmark, Finland, Netherlands, Romania, Greece), RMF (Poland), Sandusky (USA), Juventus (Hungary), Prima (Romania), Clear Channel (USA), Virgin (UK, Thailand, Jordan, France, Turkey and India), AMP (Malaysia), Regenbogen, Big FM, RPR1 (Germany), Communicorp (Ireland), Lagardere (France), MFM (France), Red, Angel, Freedom (Greece) and dozens of other great radio stations around the world.

No Investment in Research? Not Smart

I completely understand and appreciate the challenge of getting people to invest in research. But in truth, it is a challenge that has to be met. It simply isn't possible for operators to get the results they want unless they better understand what's working well for their listeners.

I am watching one national network in France. They go month after month bleeding money. Nobody could be happy with that.

With what stations spend on morning shows it is not smart if management fails to support that team with carefully researched programming.

I don't think that good research alone can create successful stations. But I know that it does some good things:

- Gives the PD a stream of information that acts as a foundation to layer the creativity on top of. For most strong PDs the foundation is boring and the creativity is fun.
- Warns him if the station veers out of the center lane or lets down the listeners
- Helps build a consistent brand, if the research is designed properly. My research analysis is. I don't know how you can evaluate branding initiatives or select among branding options without good listener feedback.

Most research being done is not very good. The reasons are many. And if that was the only option, I could see the case for doing little or no research. ***I know, however, that good interaction with and feedback from listeners is always an option.***

When operating in panic mode, stations do save some money. But they also fail.

They don't solicit feedback and they don't gain new understanding.

"Every properly done study points to shorter, more frequent breaks.."

Bad Spot!

Sometimes I think we have blind spots about bad spots.

I hear bad spots on radio stations all the time. I'm sure you do too.

And while you may feel differently, I know that they bother me more than do bad songs.

As programmers, what do we do about spots? Usually, nothing. After all, they are the sales department's responsibility. Or they are the production department's responsibility. Or they are the ad agency's responsibility.

But let me ask you something. How entertained does your listener feel when you follow up their favorite song with a bad quality spot? Sure, they'll still like the song. But will they like you? With the high quality of competition today, other stations may be playing that favorite song or one just as good. But what if they play it in a better environment than you? Yes, you're dead.

Programmers strive very hard to present a consistent and compelling on air image. Commercials that are inconsistent with that effort destroy it.

The listeners don't know that the program director isn't responsible for every minute. And they don't care.

Techniques

Ideally, convince your station management of this: because the listener thinks it is all programming, you should have a role to play in determining the standards for commercials, just as you do for announcers and music.

Failing that (and you probably will), ask for a meeting of minds.

Work together with the rest of the management team. Most important, include the sales manager in this effort. Design guidelines you can agree on regarding the loudness, tempo and quality of spots. Base this on what kind of mood your listeners want and how they want to be spoken to. What kind of background music is appropriate? How good a speaking voice should the announcer have? Can they yell? Can they speak very rapidly? What do you do when the audio is muddy? If a commercial is too long, how do you respond? There are a lot of details, but it comes down to what is appropriate for your target audience.

If nothing else, the process of discussing it will make everybody aware of all the issues that enter into spot production. They will think, maybe for the first time, about commercials as the programming elements that they are. Your sales manager may be literally programming 20% of the station. A sales manager who understands this will gain a new appreciation for the importance of the quality of the spots they are selling.

I can remember three different programmers I worked for who had standards for commercials. In each case, we (the air talent) received huge documents of 20 to 50 pages that gave us a lot of guidelines for how to write, produce and even label commercials. It was helpful and professional. Do you have something similar?

“How entertained does your listener feel when you follow up their favorite song with a bad quality spot? “

With commercial free streams from satellite, Internet radio and digital music players, isn't this issue even more important than back in the days when I was reading those long memos from my program directors?

Take Action

If you're typical among programmers you're already very concerned about commercial quantity. And you're doing everything you can to control it and manage it.

But there is another side. Do you also have a plan in place to deal with commercial quality? Today would be a good day to start or to make it a bigger priority.