

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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Are Those Long Commercial Breaks Really the Best Thing for Your Brand?

One of the things you should spend some time thinking about is the length and placement of your commercial breaks. You might want to take some time to talk with your listeners about how they want you to structure your commercial breaks.

Particularly in the US, where ratings are determined using the Portable People Meter most broadcasters are clustering commercials into two long breaks.

Why the clustering?

Arbitron's methodology requires 5 minutes in a quarter-hour (:00-14, :15-:29, :30-:44 and :45-:59) or the listening doesn't count. If you start listening to a station at 11:11, you'll only spend 4 minutes out of the :00-:14 quarter-hour. No credit is given. So stations are starting their breaks at :11 and at :41.

Training Them to Go Away?

Indeed, it appears that people "get it". Some of them. They tune away or walk away for the 6 to 8 minutes the commercial break lasts, then come back. Some people take this as evidence that this plan works. But does it?

People are taking advantage of this commercial structure and trying to work with it. But two questions remain:

1. If you gave them short breaks, would they be trained to act differently? Would they feel that the effort to tune away from an interruption usually shorter than a single song is worth it? Or would they simply leave the radio alone?

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.

2. Do people enjoy very long commercial interruptions, if they are then rewarded by long sweeps of music? To answer that, we have to ask them.

The evidence seems strong: Listeners prefer shorter, more frequent breaks.

Two very long commercial breaks per hour sound awful. But there is mounting pressure for the pendulum to swing back.

What is right for you? I don't know, of course, but I do believe that one of the criteria you should use is what your own listeners think. Maybe they are divided. Maybe it isn't very important.

Or maybe you can make a couple of changes and drastically improve their impression of your radio station.

Here are some guidelines for asking your listeners about this:

This is one of those issues where you must take some extra care in terms of how you pose the question. First, you will do best if you ask about this in a setting where you can help the respondents visualize the choices. That means a focus group, panel discussion or AMT (group music test). It is very difficult to do it properly in a telephone study. It can be done, but it is harder and most research companies don't ask the question correctly. So check out next month's newsletter where we'll give you the answer...Just kidding! Here is what you do: Draw a clock on a screen or whiteboard. Say something like "A radio station must play 12 minutes of commercials in an hour. How would you prefer that they divide up these minutes?" In hundreds of focus groups in all formats the respondents design an hour with short breaks, limited to 2 minutes in length.

They do not design what program directors have been giving them.

To quote professor and researcher Roger Wimmer: "Program directors generally don't follow the "more breaks/fewer commercials" route because it SEEMS that longer music sets are correct. In addition,

"The evidence seems strong. Listeners prefer shorter, more frequent breaks."

EVERYBODY is doing the longer music set approach, so it MUST be right. Radio people tend to...not question many things. The people who do question things and ask "why?" generally tend to be more successful than those who merely follow what others are doing."

Of course, you should ask your listeners and find out what they want from you. Who knows what they will say, or whether there is a difference between, for example, men and women. Don't do something just because other stations do.

If you try this in a phone survey, remember to let the respondents know that the total number of minutes of commercials are the same on two stations before you describe the two approaches. Doing research in the right way and finding out what approach to commercial break design is desired by your listeners is important. It will help you provide the listeners with the most enjoyable station possible, given that we **are** going to play commercials.

More Work for Program Directors: Thank You Internet!

It is a mixed blessing to be sure, but believe it or not, it is a good thing.

I'm referring to all the new work that many PDs have to do that revolves around the Internet.

I have some advice:

Embrace it!

In fact, seek out more.

Every day, you either move yourself and your career into the future, or you fall behind. How our listeners get information and entertainment, and what they find compelling and credible, are of huge concern to us as programmers. And if you truly think of yourself as being in the entertainment business, and not just the AM/FM radio business, you have got to be learning new skills everyday.

With the developments in music distribution, Internet radio, and social networking, there is a lot to learn.

Some things you might want to think about mastering:

Streaming audio

Do you know how your audio gets to a Web server, how it is distributed, what it costs per user, how you finance it, how you recover the investment, what the quality is and could be, how many people use it and when, and what you'd need to know if you ever wanted to do it yourself, somewhere else?

'Yes' to all the above would be great for your career, don't you agree?

Alternate channels

Some companies are building alternate radio stations on the Internet. A CHR might have, as an example, four audio streams on the Net: the normal station, a pop rock version, an urban/R&B version, and a rap version.

"We have become agnostic about delivery and are completely passionate about content"

What kind of skills does it take to rapidly and skillfully deploy something like that? How do you keep them all viable, and in touch with who you are, yet unique enough to be compelling? How do you get this done with too few staff, yet keep it fresh? How do you manage your time?

You can look at that as a pain. Or you can look at it this way: People (like you?) who can do this well are going to be hired just about every time they have a job interview. Or maybe they'll just stay where they are and keep getting raises.

Air personality / Listener interactions

You can talk more to your listeners than you do today. Do you make full use of blogging, podcasts, Facebook, Twitter, Wikis, surveys, updates and databases on your Web?

No, you don't. I know you don't because this stuff is changing rapidly every day. But you can educate your staff and together you can keep your station (and your skills) at the leading edge. Given how few other programmers are going to want to work that hard, you'll be a leading expert in no time!

What Will You be Programming in Five Years?

Who's the threat? Who's going to control the future?

Do you believe that the wireless Internet will continue to grow? Do you believe that for cell phones an always-on Internet connection will be standard in five years? Do you think we will have to compete for music and spoken content listening done by millions using their iPhones and Androids? Do you think iPads and other tablets make it more fun to consume and interact with entertaining media?

Will all this be available in your car?

I'm counting on all of the above and more. That's why I believe **you can't do too much or work too hard when it comes to preparing for tomorrow**. You want to be ready to be a highly skilled entertainment programmer, ready to send compelling content anywhere: an FM transmitter, a satellite uplink, or a Web server.

Today, you have the opportunity, perhaps the best you'll ever have, to experiment on the Internet while the stakes aren't too high. What works on the Web? What doesn't? What lessons are the same as for terrestrial broadcast, and what new lessons are there for you to learn? I will leave you with this quote from John Hogan, president and CEO of Clear Channel Radio:

"We have become agnostic about delivery and are completely passionate about content"