

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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Is Your Music Test On The Air?

Music tests are not like market studies and perceptual studies. Music tests are far more actionable and immediate. They are also a substantial investment, and it is important that we design and implement them in a way that best translates the listeners' desires to what comes out of the speakers. Here are some techniques to help make sure that happens.

Music Testing Basics

The basic concepts behind music testing are simple and effective.

1. Talk to a group of people who are, in general, interested in the music you play.

You'll recognize immediately that this is a two-way street. You pick the music you play because, in general, it is the music enjoyed by the people you want to listen to your station. Over time, the interplay between the people and the music may cause you to change the overall sound of the station. Usually this is gradual.

Market studies, format studies, perceptual studies and others are often designed to help you get that 'big picture' thinking correct. And sometimes, through what you learn in a market study or as a result of a format change, you may make a huge change to your sound.

An even more effective tool, if you've been in your format for a while, is experience. Over time you'll observe which demographic groups like your music the most, and which subtypes they are most excited about. You'll learn which other stations' music they also like, and which stations have tapped into your listeners' radio time. And you'll make adjustments.

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.

But usually, the purpose of a music test is not to make a big change. It is to gather together a group of the 'right' people, and find out which specific songs you can use to keep them happy.

2. Get their opinions about the songs you think have the best shot at a strong rating.

This is critical. Never leave out the biggest hits, just so you can test more songs.

There are a lot of ways to rate music. I'm proud to say that the approach I designed is also the most used approach in radio worldwide. But whatever approach you use, there are really just 4 things you must try to learn:

1. Do they know the song?
2. Do they like the song?
3. Is this a favorite, a song they are passionate about?
4. If they don't like the song, is it because they never did, or because they are tired of it?

For more details about designing answer scales to rate music, please ask me for a free copy of my book **"How to Conduct the Perfect Music Test"**. Visit our Web site at www.UpYourRatings.com for details.

3. Analyze it.

In our case, that means that we apply the entire MusicVISTA suite of analysis software.

4. Put it on the air.

Implementation Techniques

What I want to do in this article is spend a little extra time on this final step: "Put it on the air".

How do you do the very best possible job of going from a report on your screen and/or paper to what comes out the speakers? There are a few rules that will nearly guarantee increased ratings, because they ensure that you will give the listeners more of what they want.

Rule 1: Balance your flow between core music and variety.

Or, to use the terms popularized by radio consultant Guy Zapoleon: alternate between hub and spoke. Other programmers think in terms of 'vertical'

"Talk to a group of people who are, in general, interested in the music you play."

songs and 'horizontal' songs. Others visualize lanes of a multi-lane 'music highway'.

All these fit. They all recognize the basic truth that you have a center to your radio station, but that you also play songs that aren't perfectly centered, yet make some of your listeners happy, are compatible enough to include in your format, and which must be controlled.

Too Tight?

If you play only songs that are very true to your core sound, you can do very well. The danger is lack of variety. You can become boring. Listeners can like what you play, but feel that you don't play enough of the body of songs that they like. And you can burn out your library.

Also, in real life, zeroing in on your core sound requires very advanced music analysis tools, like our Variety Control and Pure Core Format Fan analysis. Otherwise, you'll find yourself giving high rotations to some songs that don't actually work well with your core songs. They will confuse listeners, violate their expectations and burn rapidly.

This has happened to countless radio stations that have signed on with tight play lists, achieved initial success, only to see rapid ratings decreases after six to eighteen months.

Too Loose?

On the other hand, if you don't get back to your 'hub' regularly (every 2 to 3 songs), a lot of things happen that limit your ratings. You don't have as clear an identity. Listeners won't understand you. Listeners won't know, automatically, who to go to when they want the music that is 'your' core sound. It will be more difficult for listeners to explain and recommend you to their friends. Worst of all, the listeners who matter most won't hear their favorite songs often enough.

Rule 2: Assign the right songs to the power categories.

With a clock in place that recognizes that "power" songs must, more than anything else, bring listeners back to music that is close to your core sound, you can move to the next step. Use the test results to assign songs to power (core/hub/vertical/center lane) or secondary (variety/spoke/horizontal/outer lanes) categories. Or pull the song off air.

How to Determine Your Powers

There are three approaches possible to making these category assignment decisions. The first will never give you full value from your music test. The second will put your thinking on the right track and be of some help. The third approach will allow you to take full advantage of the latest in programming technology.

Approach 1: Big Testing Songs

This is the 'Billboard Top 100' approach. It is not very effective. With this approach, just put the "best testing" songs in power categories. But big test scores are often achieved by songs that are not very representative of your station's core sound. This can be because they are crossover hits, novelty songs, or just didn't offend any group very much. Look at the top testing songs in any music test. In almost every case, you'll see a wide variety of music types represented. All of these do not have equal value to your radio station.

Consider how Amazon.com recommends books with the phrase "...others who bought BOOK A also bought BOOK B". They know that since you bought book A, you will be much more likely to be interested in another

book that tends to "cluster" with book A. That book is book B.

Music works the same way. If SONGS A, C, E, G, Q, and R are all part of your core sound, you need to find powers that are liked by the same people that like songs A, C, E, G, Q, and R. The statistical technique that accomplishes that is cluster analysis. Simple test scores can never give you that.

"Simple test scores won't make your powers more consistent and thus able to bring your station back to a common ground"

Approach 2: Use Programming Judgment

Some program directors are really good at this approach. Since simple test scores won't give you feedback on how well each song plays with the other children, simple test scores won't make your powers more consistent and thus able to bring your station back to a common ground. You need to add something more to your decision making process. Then, you'll do a better job of assigning songs to power and secondary categories.

If your research company has no "fit" tools to help you, two things are true.

- **First, you aren't using my company, Steve Casey Research.**

- **Second, you can still give this serious consideration.**

You are the program director, and you've lived with this station. You know the listeners. You know the music. So you have a vision for the station. You know what type (s) of music are most central to your success. In the absence of statistical tools and listener feedback, you must use your own judgment.

- 1. Pick out the powers, as usual, based on test scores. Look, of course, for burn problems, differences between your core listeners and your cume, demographic imbalance and amount of passion.
- 2. Hear each song in your head. Imagine that it is scheduled to play after six minutes of commercials. Does THIS song represent your 'hub' sound? Is it the sound you want to use to reward your most loyal listeners? Was it worth the wait, given what kind of music they come to you for? Does this song tell the listeners clearly that they are on your station? Or is this a 'variety' sound? Rate each potential power.
- 3. Now, pull 30% of the songs back out of power. Pull the 30% that you rated worst in step 2 above. Really, 30%, based on our experience.
- 4. Replace those songs with songs that didn't test quite as well, but which strongly represent the most important type (s) of music that define your radio station's unique position.
- 5. You can fill out the secondary categories with the powers you pulled because the fit is bad, and other songs that have lower test scores. Fit won't be nearly as important in your secondary categories. Those categories are supposed to provide alternate sounds and add variety to your station, widening your overall appeal. Of course, if you are battling hard to establish a strong or initial identity, tighten even this category as much as you need to.

Approach 3: Use MusicVISTA analysis tools

This works very much like approach 2 above, except that you get "fit" feedback from the listeners.

Personally, I have a goal: I would like to help every serious commercial station get more out of their music research by using the tools I have developed.

I explain above how you can bring "fit" into your thinking in a way that doesn't need advanced analysis tools. But, if you allow us to help you, here is what we can add:

1. **Music Fit Analysis:** As explained above, we look at what songs "get along with" other songs. This is not so very different from Amazon or your favorite music recommendation engine.

2. **Center:** Yes, you know where the center of your station is. But we calculate where the music test respondents place the center. We contrast your core listeners with your cume, your males with your females, etc. This additional feedback helps you lock down your vision about the station's programming with great confidence.

3. **MusicVISTA:** This is our newest on-screen research analysis tool. You'll see, even as you're working with test scores, all the 'fit' detail about a song as well. You'll still want to hear the song in your head. But now, if it doesn't sound quite 'core' to you, you'll have the additional information you need about whether the listeners agree. Planning your powers and secondary categories is easy.

3. **Pure Core:** We isolate a key group of respondents: Pure Core Format Fans. These people, all of whom took part in the AMT, are grouped together because they think alike about the music, not about your station. If you're properly centered, the results for both groups will be similar. If they are not, what fun we have looking at the differences and discovering ways to make the station even better!

4. **Discrete Music Clusters;** It took two years to develop, but it was worth it. We break down your music into the correct number of discrete music clusters. These aren't picked in advanced as is done by some music research companies (those are actually music montages, not clusters). These are based on the completed test. The amount of deep understanding you will gain about the various music types you play (or should avoid) is astounding.