

March 1, 2003

.....BULLET POINTS.....

Broadcast Decency -- What's a Good Morning Show Host To Do?

Mel says, "Don't screw up!" Clear Channel says, "We now have a zero-tolerance policy for indecency." And we say, at least until the election year is over, "when in doubt, leave it out."

Yes, friends, it's an election year and there's a tempest brewing around indecency and obscenity. Janet Jackson, Bono and Bubba the Love Sponge didn't make matters any easier, but it's hardly their fault. Indecency is a great rallying cry for demagogues and an election year only fuels the game of political and corporate posturing around blue material.

We would normally advise talent to be smart and responsible about content and know the difference between what's simply perceived as bad taste or inappropriate social behavior and what's illegal. The trouble is the FCC can't answer that question with any specific guidelines either and it all gets back to community standards and the government's lack of faith in free markets. In a truly free market, the community standards would dictate what aired on the radio. Advertisers would refuse to be associated (as frequently happens) with shows that offended the majority of their customers.

In actuality, in most communities, as much as we don't like to admit it, the language used around a typical household by mom, dad, brothers, cousins, peers, and even grandparents who are old enough to know better is far more obscene than anything Opie and Anthony or Howard Stern have ever uttered on their "most offensive" shows.

But this isn't about a majority of the community. In the U.S. we work to protect the rights of the minority, which in this case is easily offended by words DJs say.

And, as we've seen, you're not safe even if you know your target audience would appreciate and applaud what you're doing.

So, get used to it, this is not going to be a great year to launch a new feature on sex toys. This is also not going to be a great year to open up and share any bowel issues you may be having. And that's a good thing. There are plenty of ways to make great buzz content without talking about vaginas or diarrhea. In reality, anyone who is over 15-years-old has already heard radio stations get "dirty", and the capacity to shock and create talk with that type of content is way past its prime. Besides, you don't want to try and beat that record fine the FCC imposed on Bubba the Love Sponge -- \$755,000.

So what's the best plan for this year? Do some brainstorming around new ways to get people talking about your show that don't have to do with graphic sex discussions, your flatulence record in high school or promoting sex in a church. There are numerous ways to create talk and memorability through 'buzz content' and still get media coverage without it being "indecent".

The Bert Show in Atlanta created buzz and kept listeners tuning in the next day with a regular feature they did: **Crazy Plans for the Weekend**: The set up: "If you've got something that you're going to do this weekend, something crazy, adventuresome, whatever, call us. And then we'll call you back on Monday morning to find out how it went." This is serial content that lends itself to great horizontal teases. Here is one of the calls they got:

[I'm Going To Surprise My Boyfriend and Propose](#)- A woman called the show excited about her plan to propose her boyfriend over the weekend and “surprise him.” The show and listeners discussed her half-baked plan and she called back “at the same time” on Monday to report the results of her weekend. (It did not go well, so it was emotional.)

The **Turn In Your Old \$20 Bills** stunt created a lot of buzz and talk in the market where it was done. They set it up with: “Since we have the new ones now, your old \$20 bills are going to have to be used by March 15 or they won’t be worth anything after that day. Go to the bank, turn in your old \$20 bills.” Ringer callers called in with “God, I’m glad you made me do that, it saved my losing all my twenties...” “Thanks a lot for your suggestion, guys, I went right down to the bank, etc.” This was carried as a theme throughout the whole show and it was big.

Another buzz creating stunt is **Walmart Raided**: Code ‘#96’ is the “all store page” in any Walmart store. Send a player into Walmart (who never use radio advertising) to make fake pages on the Walmart phone, such as Immigration Agent pages (“There’s an officer from immigration here who needs to see all of you in the lunchroom right now.”). Shows frequently get calls from inside employees encouraging them on and reporting the inside efforts to stop the fake pages.

Remember also that at the core of any great entertainment is **conflict**, and there are many ways to create it. A feature like *War of the Roses*, for example, is centered on conflict. You can also pick up on controversy in the news -- recently you could have had discussions about the Mel Gibson movie, gays getting married, fighting preemptive wars, jobs going overseas, not to mention the inherent conflict built into reality TV shows. There is amazing content potential this year that will do far more to generate buzz for your show than yet another dick joke.

Our advice: give it a rest. That doesn’t mean ‘don’t stir up trouble’. A good morning show can still have the program director and general managers’ phones ringing with upset or shocked listeners. There are plenty of ways to do that, which won’t get your station’s license revoked.

Give your bluer material a rest for the next 9 to 12 months and it will be all the stronger when you get to bring it back after the elections are over, the flurry has died back down, and the government and broadcast corporations have postured each other into their respective corners. When in doubt, leave it out.



THE NUTS AND BOLTS OF EFFECTIVE PHONE SCREENING

Determining how good a caller will be is the job of **Call Screener** -- the person who sits in the production booth and asks callers their names and what they want to talk about. People who are on topic, articulate and original are put in line to go on-air, while the “also-rans” are politely turned down.

Prepping callers before they go to the host on-air is VERY important. In the same way that contestants on TV game shows seem pumped, your callers should sound like they know the host, are thrilled to be on-air, and come quickly to their point.

Before the call goes to the host, the call screener should:

1. **Qualify the caller.**

Not everyone who calls should get on the air. If the caller's point is vague or the caller rambles making his/her point, the producer should pre-interview the caller. Ideally, the caller's primary function is to set up the host. They are there to put the ball right on the tee so the host can hit a long drive. A good producer or phone screener knows the hosts so well that they either select the callers (or prompt them) to make the hosts look good.

2. Tell them to turn down the radio.

You can explain the delay factor, and remind them to keep it down even while they're on hold.

3. Warm people up.

Get the caller energized, loosened up, and in some cases suggest to them what you want them to say or a better way of making their point to get more response from the hosts or the audience.

4. Rehearse.

If there's time, rehearse the on air conversation off air before the caller goes on the air. Tell them that even though they are holding a phone that this is a radio show, not a phone conversation. Help the caller get it down to an opening statement that communicates his/her point or tells a story succinctly. If the caller can't do so, politely pass. And remind the listener to SPEAK UP!

5. Rejecting a caller.

A good caller is relevant, interesting, funny or poignant and has a story to tell. It's a person who adds to the show and makes it better. Ask yourself, can this person add new information; a personal experience; or strong, passionate opinions?

Put the caller on hold for 10 seconds, then come back on the line and apologize that "Miguel's got a couple of other calls lined up and we don't want to keep you on hold if we're not sure there will be time for you."

Or say "Thank you, I'll pass your comment along."

Or: "We cannot use your call today, but we appreciate you taking the time to call." Then hang up without waiting for an argument.

6. When you have a caller you will put through:

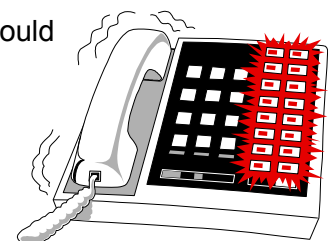
Tell the caller that, when he/she gets on-air to speak they should "speak loudly and clearly and come right to the point". Tell them the host will call them by name and say 'you're on the air' as their cue or the hosts may cue them by saying "Hello/Hi (Juan)". They should skip the how-are-you's for time purposes, but you can suggest that "If you enjoy Miguel's show, tell him. He'll be very flattered to hear that you do."

Let them know they may not say goodbye should the conversation take off between the hosts after they've made their point. Tell them not to take it personally since the hosts have to concentrate on the show on-air. Things callers don't need to say:

- "How's it going?" or "What's up?"
- "Nothing" – if the host asks them "what's going on." The caller should be prepared to answer that question with his/her point.
- Their name – if the host has introduced them (it's redundant)

If the caller is a contestant, tell him/her:

- "Sound excited to play."
- "Guess even if you don't know the answer."



7. **Put the call with the most potential for causing a response in the listeners on first** (strongest opinion, extreme view, great story, etc.). Those are the kinds of calls that will fuel other listeners to call the show.
8. **If the topic at hand is an issue, feed the host callers in alternating order of viewpoint.**
Doing so will:
 - Make your show sound balanced.
 - Make the show more engaging.
 - Provoke more callers.
9. **If it's a topic going on for several minutes try also to alternate caller genders male/female, and ages younger-sounding-caller/older-sounding-callers.**
10. **Also, for issue-oriented discussions try to get "sparks."** Radio thrives on conflict and listener interactivity. Favor callers who disagree with the host and each other. If calls are all one sided, push the interesting ones, the ones with passion, to the top of the list.
11. **As a phone screener you should not be concerned with how long someone has been on hold waiting to go on the air.** You can check in with them periodically and let them know you haven't forgotten them, but remember that the point of this is to make a powerful broadcast experience for THE LISTENERS, not the callers. Let them get mad and yell at you – your first priority at all times is to protect the product on air and make sure it's powerful.
12. **Stay in communication with the host throughout the course of the program.** Even if you are busy screening, try to listen to the show.

SOURCES FOR BOOKING GUESTS:

If you need additional help booking guests, here are a couple of sources:

Art Sears has produced radio for years in Boston and NYC and will provide a kind of 'second producer' service to morning shows for booking guests. It's a personal service where he'll talk and email back and forth frequently and send suggestions twice weekly. Call or email him to get a more detailed proposal: 203 324-4333 artsears@optonline.net.

The Guest Exchange Inc. is a free service started by producer Jeff Dauler. You will receive booking information for A-list celebrities, sports figures, newsmakers, etc. who are available for your show emailed to you each week. To start your subscription, visit their website www.guestexchange.com and click on the sign-up link.



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