

# programming **To win**

by Peter Smith



## A Fresh Coat of Paint

When's the last time you gave a critical listen to your station's imaging package? Do your non-music elements sound fresh, entertaining and unique? If the answer is "not really," then maybe it's time to put a fresh coat of paint on the station.

Once you've decided to make adjustments, what are the most effective ways to repackage your station? One step is to change your voiceover talent. Since many stations today have more sweepers than live jock breaks per hour, this can be a big facelift for a radio station.

Before you make this dramatic move, be clear on what type of delivery makes sense for your station. Are you looking for strong-and-compelling? Maybe you want to be friendly-and-funny. Some stations need a sarcastic-and-hip approach. Develop a simple summary statement describing how you hear your station with the new voice talent. Then choose candidates that best fit the brand personality of your station. Have each potential voice talent record a few lines custom for your station. It's better to hear them dry rather than their meticulously produced demo. Often, you'll find that you hear their performances quite differently without all the bells and whistles of sharp production. Remember, you are evaluating the raw voice talent, not their production abilities.

After you've narrowed your choices down to a few station voice candidates, look at the business factors beyond their voice quality. How good is their customer service? This is potentially a long-term partnership and you need to know what to expect. Are the copy-per-page requirements reasonable or cumbersome? Is the daily deadline something you can work with? Will they generally cooperate at those times when you need a little extra?

Another option is to add an additional voice to freshen your imaging. A second voice can cut the occasional page of workparts. Find a fresh voice that contrasts well with your existing

voiceover talent. Since there is less work involved, make sure you are able to keep costs down. Many up and coming voice talents will do the work on a per-page basis, and that can help keep you under budget.

Increase the variety of voices in your imaging by involving your listeners. If you've got a slogan that listeners will easily spit out, gather dozens of voices saying it ("KXXX Rocks!" for example). Before sending staff out to gather listener soundbites, put together a cheat sheet of what messages you want to get from fans. Focus on the message and not necessarily on specific phrases. Use your station's imaging copy as a framework but allow some latitude in the particular words. The underlying message is what is most important.

Keep it simple. Don't expect too much from on-the-street voices. Steer the listener voice parts to your specific positioning needs. Basic, natural sounding stuff where listeners describe elements of the radio station, or simply react emotionally, are best. Make sure the listener attitude reflects the station's attitude. Generic "You guys are great!" soundbites do little to develop your image. This is the major shortcoming of many radio station efforts at gathering listener testimonials.

The next option to give your imaging a facelift is to make a shift in overall production style. Say you have a very quick, energetic sound with lots of edits, bleeps, and bloop. Maybe it's time for a simpler and more streamlined approach — if it fits your vision for the station. Too many bells-and-whistles can detract from the message instead of enhancing it.

Perhaps your station has used a lot of TV and movie drops in imaging in the past. You may want to cut back on that and put more emphasis on creative copy. On the other hand, perhaps your station has poor production values and the sweepers sound "dry." Look to traditional

sources of sound bites but also bear in mind the vast resources for unique sounds available on the Internet.

It's also worth paying attention to what your key competitors are doing with their imaging. A key to remember here is that your on-air imaging is the station's signature — this is how you are going to convey your image and attitude. It's important to keep your station's sound unique. Discuss the sound of the station with your imaging person. Be honest about how you hear the station today and be open about where you hear it going in the future.

Do you have the resources in-house to put together the sound you want? Bartered format-specific imaging packages and outside production services have become increasingly popular for radio stations. Smaller staffs with multi-station responsibilities don't have time to produce consistently great imaging. However, there are a number of independent producers who can take over your imaging duties, usually for a reasonable price. Some stations use outside producers a couple of times a year to do a fresh package before each ratings book. Other stations have ongoing retainer deals where the majority of the imaging and promos get outsourced.

Take the time to carefully evaluate whether the way you sound between the songs is telling your story consistently and effectively. The bottom line is that your imaging is one of the most valuable ways you communicate your station's brand essence to your listeners. It's your audio logo.

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