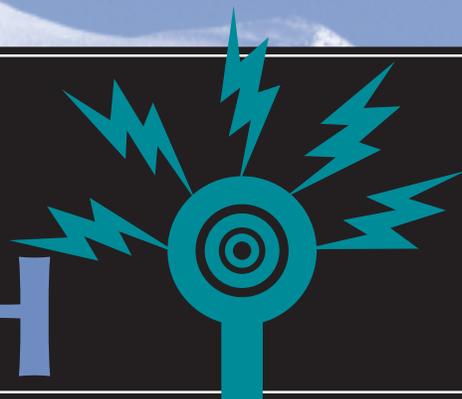


DEMERS DISPATCH



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Get Your Mind Out of the Clutter

For more than five years, DeMers Programming has been sounding the alarm bell that clutter would adversely affect radio usage. After the years of pressure that Wall Street put on the public companies to grow revenue at all costs, we have reached a tipping point. It is our belief that no issue is more immediately critical to broadcasters than recently initiated policies to control clutter on radio stations at the group ownership level.

While it is heartening that many major broadcast companies are now taking steps to control clutter, we remain concerned about those in the business who think that they don't share this problem. It is our sense that many managers still feel clutter control is a non-issue for their operations. This is because their station, cluster or group has maintained good inventory control over recent years, even while some competitors were less responsible in this regard.

In fact, that view may have been technically correct. However, the growing perception out there in the real world is that radio as a whole is a cluttered medium — not just a handful of radio stations. As far as radio listeners and advertisers are concerned, when the largest broadcast companies acknowledge a problem, that paints every radio station with the same brush. If your station, cluster or group has not addressed the clutter issue in some manner up to this point, you'd better get on it.

If you share our belief that radio has an industry-wide perceptual problem, what can and should you do about it?

First we need to define the problem — what is “clutter” anyway? From the product perspective, clutter is anything that takes away from the listeners' positive experience.

While some may feel that is an over simplification, the truth is that this is how listeners perceive radio. To them, we are a utility whose job is to entertain and inform — period. Obviously, we cannot eliminate every item of potential clutter from our stations — otherwise we'd be broadcasting dead air. But we can improve our stations by cleaning up our act.

To tackle the problem effectively at the local level, management first needs to recognize that this is a problem that needs to be addressed on a station-wide (or cluster-wide) basis. This is not just a sales or programming issue. The two poles of the radio station each need to take

responsibility for their fair share of the problem and work together to devise practical solutions that benefit the entire station or market cluster.

But before you get into counting spots and timing breaks, it's important to get a good sense of the local playing field. First, review your ratings and research. How does your station stack up in terms of the competitive environment? Is there anything in the data pointing to a potential issue with spotloads, too much talk etc.?

After that review, it's quite possible that many managers still would not perceive the need for any change at their radio stations. That's great... but there's another level to all this. Unfortunately, the challenge is not simply a matter of determining if you may have a clutter problem now. It is also a

continued on page 4

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QUESTIONING CLUTTER

SALES STANDPOINT

IS THERE A STATION POLICY ON COMMERCIAL INVENTORY?

Maintaining strict inventory control is among the most challenging aspects of managing the sales impact on the on-air product. Define a limit on total commercial load and make sure everyone clearly understands and implements the policy... including what to do when that limit is reached. It is also important to understand how that inventory is deployed throughout each daypart and to maintain proper spot levels within each hour.

DO YOU HAVE A POLICY CONCERNING COMMERCIAL QUALITY?

Let's face it, when listeners say they "hate commercials," they often mean that they are tuning out obnoxious, irritating spots. The goal should be to create quality commercial messages that complement the station's programming product. Clients who insist on doing their own spots may change their minds if they are presented with creative options or learn of the success others have had using ideas generated by your station.

DO VALUE ADDED MENTIONS REALLY ADD VALUE?

One of the real clutter-builders over the past few years has been "Value Added" — commercials without the constraint of inventory. After all, what's a little ten second mention? Well, it's more clutter! Is there a rule of thumb that determines the amount of value-added promotion you will provide that takes into account the size of the order? When you do offer additional inventory are your polices fair and consistent?

DO YOU HAVE CONSISTENT POLICIES ON BILLBOARDS AND LIVE TAGS?

Tags were once simply "Brought to you by Fred's Taco Hut." These days it's "Brought to you by Fred's Taco Hut, at 239 Canondega Way off of Route 34, behind the Wal-Mart. While you're there, don't forget that we're featuring Fred's new Finny Fun Fish Taco, with more fat, lower carbs and no fishy aftertaste." You get the idea...

HAVE YOUR LIVE ENDORSEMENTS OUTLIVED THEIR USEFULNESS?

Let's face it, the supply of on-air personalities who could stand to lose a little weight or are ready for laser surgery is rapidly being depleted. Unless you are using a major station personality, these endorsements often come across as insincere chatter. When considering the options, be sure to determine whether or not endorsements are really the best tool to get across your client's message.

ARE SPONSORSHIPS WEIGHING YOU DOWN?

This started off rather innocently. Your station was doing a feature, and you'd get someone to sponsor it. These days, however, we are often asked to provide ideas to stations that "need a feature for the ten o'clock hour" simply to meet sponsorship demands, not programming goals. So the clutter is not only the sponsorship but often the feature itself.



ARE YOUR REMOTE BROADCASTS EVEN REMOTELY INTERESTING?

Poor technical quality, poor controls on live personality breaks and unprepared client content can conspire to drive away listeners — and potential customers. If the account executive, air personality and client are not all in sync on the expectations and the execution of a remote broadcast then you are likely asking for trouble.

ARE YOU MANUFACTURING CLUTTER WITH WEAK SALES PROMOTIONS?

There was a time when these were described as "no-charge 30 second commercials," but now they are often referred to euphemistically as Sales Promos. What are the dollar requirements for committing to sales promotions? It is important that there be a consistent review and approval process that works across both the sales and programming departments.

QUESTIONING CLUTTER

PROGRAMMING PERSPECTIVE

HAVE YOU REVIEWED THE PROGRAM LOG RECENTLY?

Do you know exactly what non-musical elements are scheduled on your station hour by hour over the course of a day? You may find that you have specific breaks during the day that have become overly cluttered. Review all station features and programming elements. Ask yourself — is everything on the air for a good reason?

ARE STATION PROMOS PRODUCED FOR MAXIMUM IMPACT?

Taking 60 seconds to tell a story that you could adequately tell in 30 seconds (because we now have Cool-Edit Pro and our Imaging guy is great!) is not a good idea. Just because it sounds flashy doesn't mean it is not perceived as an interruption. If you have a big promotion with a lot of moving parts, produce several versions of a promo — one to catch listeners' interest, one to explain the details, etc.

DO YOUR SWEEPERS AND LINERS DELIVER A STREAMLINED MESSAGE THAT'S BRAND APPROPRIATE?

Be careful to construct copy that isn't too busy or overwritten. Too often, copy is jotted down quickly just in time for a voiceover session, figuring that the "editing" will be done in the production room. Take the time to write...and rewrite... for clarity and brevity. In addition, don't let your message get lost in overproduction.

DOES YOUR ON-AIR STAFF PRACTICE GOOD WORD ECONOMY?

Most listeners will tell you that they want the music — not useless chatter. They are NOT kidding! Have your airstaff prep for maximum impact and entertainment value with minimum words. After all, there are a few great "personalities" out there, but many more "disc jockeys." Each should perform to the expectations of the audience.

WHO'S GOT THE TIME...TRAFFIC...WEATHER?

Morning Drive — yes, yes, yes — tell us the time. Tell us it's going to rain. Save us from that backup on the interstate. But when form rules function, everyone loses. There are stations built for five-day forecasts, traffic reports at noon and headlines at the top of the hour. If your station is not built that way — don't reach. Meet the expectations of listeners and stay with your strengths.

ARE YOU WINNING WITH CONTESTS AND GAMES?

Whether playing for Arbitron or playing for clients, be sure that your games are entertaining for everyone. Contesting that has narrow appeal, or does not match the attitude of your brand, is creating tuneout potential. If your game or contest does not enhance the entertainment experience for those who just listen, as well as those that play, then it's probably in the way.

ARE ALL OF YOUR BARTER SPOTS NECESSARY?

Many stations have agreements to run commercials in exchange for some sort of information service or syndicated programming. While this costs the station no cash, it is still costing valuable airtime. In the end, the listener doesn't differentiate... these spots are still potentially more clutter. Justify why each barter spot is on the air.



WHAT'S WITH ALL THE BAD SONGS?

Yep — they're clutter to a lot of people. It's tough to avoid everyone's pet peeve songs, but that's what music testing is for. Playing a bad song is like sending an embossed invitation to tune out. Manage your music for maximum Time Spent Listening. That means playing not only the right songs but also playing them at the right time. Creative music flow can really enhance the listening experience.

Get Your Mind Out of the Clutter

continued from cover

matter of determining what the future may bring — will you soon develop a perceived clutter problem due to changes in the competitive environment?

You're not operating in a vacuum. As other stations in your market deploy anti-clutter tactics, reduce spotloads or change spot deployment, you are now almost forced to get into the game. The acts of individual stations change the collective perception of the medium across the market.

It will be some months before any research project will yield evidence of a station moving the needle in listeners' minds in terms of a clutter reduction initiative. However, conventional wisdom suggests that at least one station in a market, and perhaps one per format, will be successful in improving their images in this regard, simply by telling listeners that they have been pro-actively combating clutter.

As noted previously, the acknowledgment of this issue as a negative for radio makes it a problem for the broadcasting industry across the board, not just individual operators. Some of these clutter busting initiatives have become big, national news. The perception being driven home is that all radio is cluttered so BE PREPARED.

To get a handle on the scope of your particular challenge, take an inventory. Review what's really happening on the air at your radio station — how many units and minutes of non-entertainment content are you really running per hour? Don't leave out anything. Write it down and get ready to negotiate.

While it's relatively easy to point out Sales clutter, some of it is just plain necessary for the economic viability of the station. Often, Programming clutter can be more insidious, dangerous and, frankly, easier to fix.

To help focus this process of self-examination we've included suggestions for your consideration when Questioning Clutter (see pages 2 and 3). These questions are roughly divided along the lines of Sales and Programming for each department to review as part of the process of developing your own anti-clutter initiatives.

The challenge is to implement change — and do it now. Don't wait for the other guy to lighten their spotload or streamline their promotional announcements. Take a hard look at every non-entertainment element on the station, make the call on what to dump and what to keep... and then follow through. Learning there is a problem and not doing anything about it is a useless exercise.

Reducing inventory, changing remote broadcast policies, controlling superfluous jock talk etc. are all difficult challenges. Many of the really hard choices have the potential to cost money in the short run. The goal here is to gauge that cost against the potential for long term erosion in listenership and, ultimately, abandonment of our medium for other less-cluttered options.



To read other “clutter busting” articles by DeMers Programming, log onto www.demersprogramming.com, click on the “PUBLICATIONS” tab and look for:

- “We'll Be Right Back After This” — Dispatch, Sept 1993
- “See Spot Run...Over the Golden Goose” — Dispatch, Oct 2004

Related Articles: • “Radio's Attention Deficit Disorder” — Dispatch, April 1996
• “Remote Control” — Dispatch, Feb 2000



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