

programming TO win

by Peter Smith

Take A Hard Look at Your Special Programming



Nearly every station offers some sort of special programming, but how many PDs regularly ask themselves *why* a particular feature is on their air? While there can be several good reasons to do special features on your radio station, all of your special programming should achieve at least one of the following five goals:

Create Listening Appointments. Healthy TSL is built on frequent occasions of listening. Well-executed features can really drive listeners to a specific time for appointment listening. Consider the success of At-Work tactics used to pump up the early midday, such as a long music sweep locked into your listeners' daily routine.

Improve Recall. It's important to give your listeners "hooks" to aid recall when it comes time for them to fill out a ratings diary. Even old warhorses like "Twofer Tuesday" still show up in diaries on a regular basis.

Support Overall Station Positioning. You can take a supporting element and feature it to enrich the listening experience. For example, if you're the Classic Rocker in your market, then a weekend Classic Concert series may help reinforce your ownership of that music style.

Grow a Specific Image that Needs Shoring Up. Maybe your station is in a head-to-head battle for image ownership of Grunge in your market. One of the tactics you might employ is a "90s Nooner" feature so you can plant your flag deep into that style.

Give the Sales Department Opportunities for Sponsorship. Face it, there's always pressure from down the hall to find new things to sell. However, avoid the trap of creating features just for sales' sake. If the feature is not a true win-win for both listeners and clients then the concept is a non-starter.

If you're confident that a particular feature meets one or more of the goals above, focus your efforts on execution. Review the following questions as you keep an ear out for the common pitfalls that can take the "special" out of special programming:

Is your feature easy to understand? For example: "*The 'Five-O'clock Free Ride' is an hour of commercial-free Rock.*" If you can't explain a feature in one simple sentence, it may not be clear to your listeners. Every feature should be clearly defined.

Is your feature sufficiently different to be considered "special"? While most features simply repackage an element of the station's existing format, listeners must feel they are deriving some additional benefit in order to make the appointment to listen.

For instance, with music and artist features, give the appearance of going outside day-to-day rotations. Just be sure to work with your talent so they have a clear understanding of the boundaries. Have a system for pre-approval (or an in-house "safe list") when you want to showcase a little depth.

Is the on-air packaging distinctive? Produce features to sound a little different than the regular format. Use the sweeper slots to reinforce the feature's name and listener benefit. The basic imaging sweepers you use the rest of the day should not be used during most feature programming.

Does the air personality handling a particular feature take "ownership" of the concept on air? How your personalities execute their features makes a big difference. Confidence, enthusiasm and belief in the feature should come through every time the jock opens the mic to talk about it. Spend time with the talent to review airchecks. If it's a request feature, coach with specific suggestions for improving their phone technique. If the feature is content driven (like a daily "Rock News"), review the copy and discuss ways to improve writing, story selection and overall pacing.

Do your listeners know that you are doing something special? Features feed on good cross-promotion. Consistent promotion increases awareness. Sweepers, recorded promos and live liners all contribute. You will have more impact by running your promos in weekly flights, instead of promoting every feature every week. Concentrate on just a few features during any one week.

At DeMers Programming, we recommend that our clients take a hard look at their feature set once per quarter. Use this opportunity to get with your staff and brainstorm ways to improve your existing features – consider how both the execution and promotion of your specials can be more creative and effective.

Long time features present a special challenge. Look for creative promotional tie-ins to put a fresh spin on the classics. Think like "Nick At Nite" -- if Nickelodeon can repackage "Three's Company" reruns for the umpteenth time, you should be able to freshen up "Block Party Weekends" in 2003 and beyond.

Consider ways to leverage your strongest features and build additional benchmarks. Instead of reinventing the wheel the next time you have an "open" weekend, take a strong daily feature and build a weekend of special programming around the concept.

You might also consider off-air methods to enhance a feature's impact. If you're doing a "Countdown," listeners can participate via website by voting for their favorite artists or songs. Or you can provide playback of a feature on your website (such as the morning show's daily phone scam) at the listeners' convenience.

Finally, consider whether or not you really need a specific feature at all. Over time, special programming can overwhelm your station's broadcast day. It makes sense to "thin the herd" periodically when reviewing your program schedule. Consider the Classic Rocker that did "Twofer Tuesdays," "Threefer Thursdays" and "Block Party Weekends." One might argue that the two and a half days of "Regular Format" left over *was* the special feature on that station.

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