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Broadcast Management 2000:
Programme Trends And Personnel Development From Singapore

By

Daniel Yun
BROADCAST MANAGEMENT 2000:
PROGRAMME TRENDS AND PERSONNEL DEVELOPMENT

From Singapore

by Daniel Yun
Vice President, SBC Radio

- Over the past few years, there have been dramatic changes in Radio in Singapore. These changes have been very positive and led to growing confidence in the medium. Listeners talk about what they hear on Radio. Advertisers testify that Radio can deliver results in immediate and direct ways.

- Radio has been marketed aggressively at both the consumer and trade levels. These efforts are showing results. Each station is better branded with a more distinct image. Station loyalty among listeners has increased; more listeners can name their favourite station or stations. More people are listening to the Radio and listening longer each day. On a past week basis, 96% of Singaporeans now listen to at least one Radio station and Average Time Spent Listening is 4 hours and 12 minutes daily. Commercials on air are more creative, or at least Radio-friendly. There is an improvement in the understanding of planning and buying airtime. In the last year, advertising revenue on Radio has increased by over 40% (compared to total adspend growth of 12%) and Radio's market share has reached over 4% of total adspend.
• Is this renewed recognition akin to the Radio phenomenon in the West during the 70s and 80s, when the medium re-defined and re-established itself in the face of stiff competition? What lessons can Singapore Radio broadcasters learn from practitioners in the more mature Radio markets, markets where Radio has survived and even prospered despite the advent of more ‘visual’, ‘glamorous’ media and the de-regulation of broadcasting which resulted in much stiffer competition?

• In the Singapore context, the need to accept changes was spurred on by competition, both from additional Radio stations and from other intruding media. Radio Ramako started transmission in 1988. NTUC Voice received licences to broadcast in 1991. On a clear day, with nine SBC stations, two from NTUC Radio, two from Batam, those from Malaysia and the BBC, one could receive over twenty FM frequencies. Listeners were then confused. Advertisers perceived Radio then as a fragmented medium. Newspapers were getting an unusually large share of the advertising pie. TV, as always, was revered for its visual ‘glamour’. During this period, a new afternoon paper was introduced with a big bang, and the arrival of cable TV was announced.

• From one viewpoint, the future of Radio was threatened. From another, it was time to re-look at Radio seriously, take stock, strategise and meet the challenges head on. This requires willingness to go back to basics and start from zero base. Firstly one needs to acknowledge that healthy competition is in effect good and stimulating for the Radio industry. And the fight for audience and the advertising dollar should not focus only on competing Radio stations but more on other media.
• While Radio in the West, especially American Radio, have long developed and re-positioned itself to suit changing lifestyles and social patterns; Singapore Radio did not evolve to meet the demands of change and competition until recently. Radio continued to exist in the shadow of TV and Press while Western Radio stayed relevant by evolving different station formats to suit different listening needs and the increasingly specialised and varied music tastes.

• As a public service broadcaster, in the past Radio was actually content to stay as ‘poor cousins’ to the increasing attention given to TV. This inferior mental outlook adopted by Radio practitioners was self-defeating and impeded progress. Besides the need to change this mental attitude, the solution was in updating our understanding of how modern listeners use the medium. The salvation of Radio in Asia is in learning from the experiences of developed Radio markets that have survived savage competition; where Radio broadcasting is a business concern, and where practitioners continue to be relevant and competitive to stay in business. This attitude will be assisted by the growing need for advertisers to maximise their advertising dollar by being ‘creative’ in their media buy.

• To facilitate the transition that Radio has undergone in the past few years, ‘new blood’ was brought in to the business. These ‘rookies’ come in at all levels, full of enthusiasm, bent on radical reforms, based on general modern principles of marketing. That they have no broadcasting experience is both a blessing and a liability. A blessing because in contrast to veterans in Radio broadcasting, they do not lug any baggage of an out-dated understanding of Radio; a liability because the Radio business is a very unique, exacting and specialised profession. The ‘new-blood’ broadcasters will therefore need extensive training and exposure, to add specific know-how to their raw enthusiasm and drive to execute changes.
• In this part of the world, the media industry really came of age in the late 70s and the 80s. Then Radio was still under-developed, an often forgotten medium in the face of TV and Print. Now as Radio starts to emerge in the 90s, there is a need to update dated perceptions and misconceptions of the medium from both the programming and advertising perspectives.

• Reviving a medium that has been forgotten for decades is an uphill task. One of the key challenges is to reposition and re-establish the relevance of Radio in the market. For the public, Radio needs to play a bigger and more meaningful role in modern society.

• The ‘Radio Days’ depicted in Woody Allen’s movie of the same name are gone. Society has moved on, and with it lifestyles and how listeners use Radio have changed. Families no longer sit around the Radio waiting for their favourite programme to come on, the way they still do with TV (even for TV this is decreasing). Busy modern lifestyles dictate that listeners tune in as and when they have the time to. And when they tune in, they expect to get what they want to hear from their favourite station.

• Format Radio aims to satisfy just such needs. The format provides a consistency to programming so that whenever the listener tunes in to his favourite station he gets to hear what he both expects and wants to hear. He is not disappointed and his loyalty to the station is developed. Radio is format-driven as opposed to TV, which is program-driven. Listeners are loyal to Radio stations, while viewers are loyal to TV programmes.
• In some ways, Radio is also no longer the mass medium nor the social medium it used to be. Radio listening has become much more personal. Listeners tend to listen to the Radio on their own rather than as a group. By its very nature, Radio is relatively ‘low-tech’ and ‘high-warmth’. As Radio is the most intimate medium where the listener relates to the voice on air on a one-to-one basis, it is able to engage its listeners mentally and emotionally. As the other media get technologically more sophisticated, the human voice over the Radio is reassuring and comforting to listeners. Radio has also become more personal in that with the proliferation of stations following de-regulation, different Radio formats cater to many varied lifestyles and personal listening preferences. By building on the personal warmth of Radio and catering to individual needs and tastes, Format Radio generates dependency and familial attachment to Radio Stations.

• Format Radio is thus based on how listeners use Radio in the modern context. It is grounded on 2 principles: segmenting the Radio listening market through specific targeting by specialised formats and maintaining programming consistency within the format. As listeners tune in and out, a varying level of frequency is needed for any news item, piece of information or hit song to ‘catch’ or reach them. Listeners do not listen all the time but rather tune in and out, thus sufficient frequency is needed in order to reach them when they are listening. Frequency is needed to maximise both the number of listeners reached as well as the number of times the listener is reached, for the listener has to hear the message several times before it makes an impact on him.

• The advertising industry needs to be educated on the target demographics of various Radio formats. The unique basics of planning and buying format Radio need to be inculcated. There is a prevalent notion that buying TV and Radio are the
same. This notion needs to be corrected. As Radio is format-driven and TV program-driven, listeners are loyal to Radio stations, while viewers are loyal to TV programmes. Television schedules are essentially based on GRPs; using the same statistical base for planning Radio may be easy and precise, but it is incorrect. A Radio GRP is different from a TV GRP because of the different ways people use the two different media. Understanding Radio as a frequency medium is different from the calculation of reach and frequency on TV.

- The various attributes of Radio, its portability, immediacy and intimacy should be driven home to the advertising agencies. As agencies are commission based, the priority of attention is focused on media that require 'bigger budgets'. Radio assignments are relegated to the less experienced in both the creative and media departments. In the creative department, Radio commercials are usually assigned to 'rookies', who firstly did not grow up with Radio and thus lack understanding of the medium. Secondly, they are not at all familiar with the basics of advertising, the inter-relation of the message and the medium. With less attention apportioned to Radio, it perpetuates the vicious cycle of the slow growth of this sound medium ironically declared by many agency executives themselves as the most under-utilised and under-valued medium. Until the value of this most cost-efficient medium is fully appreciated, advertisers cannot maximise results from their investments in Radio.

- Until advertisers understand how to use the medium effectively, they will still be asking for sponsorships of the one hour/half hour infomercials. This manner of advertising will not maximise results as there is no frequency. The effectiveness of the advertised message is diminished, while the listenability of the station is compromised.
Advertisers stand to gain from the development of Radio as it is one of the most cost-effective mass media. It is ideal for niche marketing. As a primary advertising medium it has the lowest wastage; for in advertising one aims to reach the highest number of prospects, not merely the highest audience figure.

As we continue to manage the changes in Radio broadcasting, Radio practitioners should urge their colleagues in the industry, agencies and advertisers, to relook at Radio as a primary medium, and assess it on its own merit and worth. The existence of a spirit of enterprise will definitely help broadcasters prepare for the new order of the day in broadcasting.

The Radio business, as practitioners will understand, is more than programming, marketing and sales. The Engineering aspect, stronger signals for stations, upgrading of equipment to reduce unnecessary staffing and computerised traffic scheduling and bookings to manage and maximise inventory, will all go to increase efficiency, productivity, staff morale and most importantly, profitability.

In recent years, Singapore broadcasters have had to update their understanding of how listeners use Radio without being weighed down by baggage from the past. Being a young and expanding industry, there are many new recruits who need training and exposure.

Potential practitioners and investors may only look at the viability of Radio as a business. These potential and existing practitioners in the industry should focus on people; training and exposing them to an industry that is under-developed in this region. With the higher profile and growth of this medium, good talents will
now look at this industry with fresh interest. The 'selling' of Radio to these talents will thus be of priority. In many parts of the world, broadcasting is to young minds still TV; Radio may be used as a stepping stone to TV. In Singapore we attempt to 'glamourise' the production of Radio commercials by providing prestigious awards and appealing incentives for superior creative work. Passionate practitioners in this region look to starting our own 'RAB' in Asia or at least in South East Asia. With cooperation and the exchange of expertise and ideas, the Radio industry will be perceived by listeners as refreshing, relevant, informative and entertaining. For investors, the industry is viable. For advertisers, the medium is effective and cost-efficient. For young talents, they can now see Radio as a possible career to aspire to.

- In Singapore last year, all media adspend growth was 14% while Radio grew by 61%. With Radio adspend at $25m, Radio had 3.4% of the advertising market. As at September 1993, Radio's share has increased to 4.3%.

- For 1993, we expect Radio adspend to grow by 47% to $37m. Assuming that all media adspend grows by 12%, our market share will stand at 4.5%.

- Over the next 3 years, if Radio were to grow by a conservative annual rate of just 20% Radio adspend will reach $64m at the end of the 3 years. If all media adspend grows by 12% annually, our market share will then register at 5.5%. These fairly conservative estimates show just how bright prospects are for the Radio industry in Singapore and for potential investors in the industry. This positive outlook should be similar for other countries in this region.

- Being meek, humble, having the willingness to learn is not just an Asian virtue, it is our strategy. In this very transitional phase of the Radio industry, the
need to continually adapt, review mind-sets, learn everything anew, understand the reality of competition and commercial viability at the higher levels of management is crucial. The experience of more mature markets that have faced these same challenges a few decades earlier have proved invaluable. In Singapore, we have been fortunate and open enough to learn from and tap the expertise of our Radio Consultants from the United States. The progress we have made in the last six months has been very impressive. As in all businesses, we need to balance short term gains and long term objectives. At SBC Radio, we have managed to maintain the momentum of growth in our listenership and revenue while implementing changes that, when institutionalised, will have an impact on the long term growth of the industry.