



WHY RADIO SHOULD BE THANKING JIMMY FALLON

HzS  d

“Fighting to Stay Free”

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And now, ladies and gentlemen...

...let's turn our attention to the pressing needs of the radio business. I would argue that number one on that list is attracting and holding onto the younger end of the listening population.

Having two kids, and having taught college radio courses, I've seen first hand how tough a challenge that is. In those classes, when I've asked how many listen to radio on an actual radio, including in the car, a few hands go up. When I ask how many listen to a station via phone or computer, maybe a couple more hands go up. But for most, music discovery and listening takes place elsewhere, as does searching out the news. One area of radio programming that seems to be safe is play-by-play sports, if for only a few students.

Even though my kids have had to live with a dad who did, and does, radio - and now takes his work home with him - they only know radio as where to find music when there's no iPod or phone connected in the car. When I watch them punching presets until they find the hit, it makes me better understand how stations are programmed today, as in for instant gratification for a fleeting audience.

The above might lead you to believe that keeping younger radio listeners engaged is a lost cause. That may also be a fair statement to make about broadcast television, even though in the case of home viewing, every one of 500 channels is equal, and it's all about what's on when, and where. Overall, though, the under-35 audience doesn't even have to watch an actual TV anymore, with plenty of video options online, including original series on Netflix, Hulu and others. No wonder we hear so much about "cord cutting" lately.

So the broadcast TV networks - which evolved from radio, prior to TV's development and growth - really have a similar challenge to radio, especially when you consider what they're up against, which is uncensored content providers. No matter what they do, neither ABC, CBS, Fox, NBC nor CW can offer programming as daring or edgy as their cable or Internet-only counterparts, not unlike the situation network radio found itself in during the late 1940s when TV added the visual to comedies, dramas and variety shows. These days, programs such as *Game of Thrones*, *The Walking Dead*, *Breaking Bad* and *Orange Is the New Black* have pushed the limits and in doing so, have attracted a large young following.

All this said, what NBC has done with *The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon* has been nothing short of phenomenal. In nearly every way one can imagine, the odds were stacked against it from the start. Consider that Fallon followed two hosts - Johnny Carson and Jay Leno - who, collectively, had targeted older viewers for over 50 years. The one blip during those 50, the temporary replacement of Jay Leno with Conan O'Brien, with the aim of bringing in youth, was a dismal failure. Consider also the glut of competition for younger viewers in late night, and a growing lack of interest in the traditional talk show format. Although Fallon had done well in the 1230pm slot with heavy social media use, edgy humor and a band that incorporated hip-hop to an extent unseen prior to that point, would any of that fly an hour earlier?

As they say, so far so good. Fallon's makeover of late night talk - from using Twitter, to visually-driven comedy bits, to games with guests, to the Roots' rap-heavy performances throughout the show - is definitely on youth's radar. When I mention Fallon in class, there's plenty of recognition and even smiles. That's hard to do with this age group in this day and age.

Obviously, there's a lesson for radio here, but what exactly is it? Let's put it this way: one of the classes I teach is "Contemporary Radio and Convergence," as in how radio has adapted to new media and used those media platforms to remain relevant to a large audience. Fallon on TV has done that better than any radio station.

While that should be a "nuff said" statement, why don't we take the next step and theorize how radio can "Fallon-ize" its younger audience?

- **Use the tools you've got.** At the heart of it all, it's still *The Tonight Show* and it's still mostly seen on television sets. Jimmy hasn't forgotten that, he's simply brought the show and its format into the 21st century. Which means radio that tries to be something else – as in, pushing aside the live entertainment value only radio can deliver 24/7 – is going to fail with youth.
- **Keep the show in everyone's mind all the time.** With the weekly “hashtag” feature that not only encourages viewer participation but makes it as easy as possible, an active webpage and constant online promotion, *The Tonight Show* is really on 24/7. There's no reason radio can't do the same as long as the programming is more compelling than simply playing the hits and delivering only the information listeners expect every day.
- **Don't throw the baby out with the bathwater.** Fallon's show still has an announcer/sidekick, a couch, guests, a band, bits, etc. In other words, the show isn't unrecognizable to anyone tuning in: it's just more young-adult-friendly. So while radio may be tempted to ditch the jingles, talent and certain music, all of those can still be effective on the right program with the right target.
- **Don't be afraid to try something new.** Fallon has taken *The Tonight Show* places it's never before been – such as your grocer's freezer, with the Ben & Jerry's “The Tonight Dough” ice cream - and look what happened. Not only has NBC brought younger viewers back (and yes, I realize there's still lots of work to do there) but it's also held onto older viewers who probably feel younger by watching. Radio can accomplish the same thing any time of day, but it has to dare to try new ideas that break the consultant-recommended mold a bit.

Without a doubt, radio is already embracing social media and going after youth wherever they are. But that's not enough. NBC knew this when Fallon's time on *The Tonight Show* began, just as CBS is surely aware of this as Stephen Colbert prepares his journey into late night. For radio as an audio-only medium, the task is tougher, but with the right live talent, a heavy dose of enthusiasm and passion, and content that young listeners feel they can't live without every day – and not only in mornings – the medium can grow its own Jimmy Fallons.

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