



IS YOUR MUSIC STATION REALLY A TALK STATION?

HZS G d

“Fighting to Stay Free”

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And now, ladies and gentlemen...

...scene: my teenage daughter misses the bus, so I drive her to school. This actually takes place about once a month, although during the summer I drive her to the camp bus every weekday morning. In either case, there's no time to grab the iPod, so it's either radio or silence (or we talk - it happens).

When the radio's on and Melody's punching presets, what pops up on nearly every station is, as you'd imagine, people talking, which irks her no end, even when the subject matter veers toward the nasty. This is because it's a “two song ride” (I've timed it) and she wants her two songs, not talk.

Look, I get the concept of morning radio on stations where music defines the brand, and why that radio has moved toward what I call 'lifestyle talk.' I'm sure there's research from here to the moon saying working adults with a steady income and lots of spending power want essentially five things in the morning: traffic, weather, news, a few songs they know and love, and, most important, to be entertained.

But...for most people, radio's product, the definition of what it does, IS what is on the air at whatever time you tune in. So for Mel, all these FM stations are talk.

And this begs a larger question, especially since so many stations now offer additional talk - and video-enhanced talk - on their websites, via social media and on YouTube. New York's rhythmic (but heavy on hip-hop) Hot 97 (WQHT), pictured above, has a YouTube channel full of material you'll only see there, and they're far from the only station with this strategy.

Oh, that question: What do these stations really want to be?

I know what they'd say: the brand encompasses not only music but also all content pertinent to the targeted audience. That's what MTV said, and look what happened to them. Does anyone looking for music video turn to MTV in 2015? Which is to say, will anyone looking for Hip-Hop (or whatever Hip-Hop morphs into) in 2025 turn to Hot 97?

As some of us will remember, it used to be easy. Even in the morning, radio stations played enough music to define their brand. On top 40, hosts like Dr. Don Rose, Harry Harrison and Robert W. Morgan still knew who was boss (pun intended) - the music. That was why people tuned in. That concept was even more important for rock radio, really for any format defined by a genre as opposed to top 40 or AC's "all over the road" stance. Now, due in great part to morning personalities who re-wrote the book - Don Imus, Scott Shannon, Howard Stern, Kevin & Bean, etc. - who did what their bosses wanted them to, that is, raise the bar for commuters stuck in traffic, morning radio abides by a different set of rules vs. the rest of the day.

Here's the thing: that set of rules doesn't mean anything to the next generation. Either you give them music or you don't. If you're a music station, play it. If you're talking for a long period of time, guess what, to them that's your product.

Many people inside radio will probably defend this strategy by saying that this generation - like all those that came before, since radio flipped to its drive-time focus in the 1950s - will grow into using radio the same way, as a talk-based utility in the morning and then for music the rest of the day. With all the alternatives that already exist and are being used (and perhaps preferred) for either music or talk in the morning - and, come to think of it, the rest of the day - I'm not so sure.

When I teach college students about radio as part of a class covering all mass media, I feel as I'm literally doing that, as in, most of them don't use

radio (and, don't even bring up newspapers!). Their link to the world is their phone, laptop and/or iPad, and in order to find it, it has to be in a place that makes sense to them. Stern is easy to find: he's on SiriusXM's Howard 100 channel. That's good branding. That means a streaming station that promises hits or R&B or jazz or metal or whatever music you like needs to be that all the time. That's where Sirius, Pandora, Spotify and a few others get the edge. It's not that radio becomes that which they can't easily define: it's that to them, the above IS radio. And it's also good branding.

So while radio's move to offer more content off the dial is good because it offers more compelling content - industry buzzwords these days - and expands the brand to other platforms that 'follow the listener,' it's potentially not so good because it may cause more confusion among the younger demographic whose only link to any audio service it hasn't yet found is Google.

I'll be the first to admit I may be completely wrong about all the above. For all I know, there are millions of younger listeners who love radio exactly as it is, are happy to be passive and to support whatever comes out of the radio any time of day. But I sense it's more likely that radio needs to address these issues if it seriously wants to bring a younger audience back into the fold, or to keep who's already there.

Shameless plug section

AND NOW I AM 1: In December *that thing with Rich Appel* hits the one-year mark, something I did not expect to happen. But I'm very proud of what we've done, and I hope you'll join us at one of our many play-times over the weekend. You can check those and lots more at our website, <http://www.thatthingshow.com/>.

AND NOW THEY ARE 18: While you're there, you can vote in the 18th annual Top 77, at the bottom of any page, the countdown of which will play in full on Rewound Radio December 26 and in 'best of' form on the following week's *that thing*....

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