

Americans are never satisfied. Perhaps it's because we live in the most affluent country on the planet and there's always something "new" we want – something we "have to have."

Think about our buying habits. We trade in cars before the loan is paid off, or lease vehicles so we can drive a new set of wheels every couple of years. We buy a new computer, only to fill up the hard drive and, of course, upgrade to a new, more powerful machine.

Meanwhile every season or so, when we're unsatisfied with our wardrobe, we donate "old" clothes to charity and "upgrade" our closet to the latest styles. (Not to mention, the incredible number of folks who "upgrade" to new spouses, keeping the US divorce rate rather competitive.) As Americans, we're always looking for the "next big thing" – that which tastes different, looks prettier, has more cachet or just plain costs more.

So, what makes you think that your product, your Radio Station, is any different? Time to face reality -- your listeners are NEVER satisfied with your radio station and they are always ready to move on. It's a frightening, but realistic thought. The minute your product becomes the "same old, same old" in a listener's mind, they begin to entertain other options. Especially if that other option has been kind enough to market effectively to spread the word that there is a new choice on the dial.

Ask any programmer who has enjoyed high ratings, then watched the numbers tumble when a competitor came on the air – even one with weak talent or a questionable music mix. The same listeners that may have indicated total satisfaction with your station in your latest research study, are the ones moving down the dial right now to check out the new station, at least for a while... just long enough to give you a ratings hit.

Programmers sometimes get caught up in the excitement of day-to-day programming and assume that everyone is "following along" – it's easy to assume that your fans are with you through thick and thin. They call every day to request songs. They show up at all your events. They praise your staff and your music on high. But, as they're giving you all this positive reinforcement, they're still curious enough to take a peek at what's behind the curtain.

Can you stop such discontent? Not any more than any restaurateur specializing in fine French cuisine can stop his best customers from checking out that new Pizza Parlor down the street. Still, the challenge that new competition presents is something that stations in "status quo" environments need to be aware of. Don't wait for someone to flip format and drive you to action. Get ahead of your listeners' ever-changing moods. In many cases, even if your competitive environment has not changed, it is likely that there is discontent brewing just under the surface.

While having a third party take your station's pulse is always valuable, this is not necessarily a time to employ a brain surgeon. Your own ears, and the experience of your staffers, can oftentimes help define the challenges you face. For example, check out your benchmarks – when was the last time that the "Five O'clock Funnies" was really funny? Do the listeners really care about those "Lunch Blocks" or are the phones dead from Noon to One every day?

Attacking oneself is often the best approach to avoiding Programming doldrums. Examine what you do. Are your listeners still spinning the prize wheel from 1974? Has your voice talent been with the station longer than you have? Has every weekend on your station been a Rock Block weekend since the *first* guy named Bush became President? If so, you're signaling your listeners that you're the same old station.

Every quarter, you should be reviewing every tactical element of your Programming and Marketing plan. Every house really NEEDS a fresh coat of paint every couple of years. When is the last time anything really "changed" at your station? Look for things that you've done for a long time and ask yourself questions like – What strategic goals does this tactic help to accomplish? Is there a better way to both entertain and win? Test yourself and learn to distinguish between "old habits" and "winning ways." Always act as if you are under attack and it is likely that you will stay ahead of the competitive curve.