



Radio's Attention Deficit Disorder

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You may not realize it but radio stations have two *paying* customers – advertisers and listeners. All this time, you thought that your audience was getting something for nothing. But, just as advertisers pay for your time with their money, listeners pay you with their time. In today's time-stressed society, "paying attention" is becoming as literal a transaction as "paying the bills."

Getting and keeping the attention of a large number of listeners is the goal of radio programmers every day. In an increasingly complex world, all of us face a growing number of demands for our attention. Therefore, convincing listeners to "pay" with the limited amount of precious time they have becomes both more difficult and more important.

Author and scholar Michael Goldhaber, writing in *Wired* magazine, makes a compelling argument for attention as the primary currency of exchange in the upcoming New Economy. Whether or not "attention" will replace "money," as the author claims, is a rather esoteric argument. However, Goldhaber's points about the commodity that we seek from our audience are worth paying attention to.

Despite predictions of dwindling natural resources, most hard goods are relatively plentiful and cheap (at least in America). So, his theory goes, attention may be the only truly finite commodity, with the total amount per capita strictly limited. Even an individual adept at "multitasking" can't focus their attention past a very specific point. Goldhaber believes, "...the attention economy is a zero-sum game. What one person gets, someone else is denied."

As more and more demands are made on our limited stock of attention, individual choices concerning the expenditure of attention will likely be made more judiciously and specifically. With the pathways for attracting attention becoming more numerous, the quantity of people necessary to be a successful attention-getter will be redefined.

An online book called *Virtual Community*, offers two guidelines to individuals using the Internet for entertainment and information: "Rule Number One: Pay attention. Rule Number Two: Attention is a limited resource, so pay attention to where you pay attention."



Radio is now competing with the Internet, a medium that affords numerous opportunities for capturing attention. The potential for everyone to have their “15 minutes of fame” has increased, but who will be paying attention and in what kinds of numbers? The ‘Net ups the ante and puts more pressure on all media to compete for audience share.

What does the increasing competition for attention mean to radio? Perhaps an adaptive style of listening is emerging. A new generation is learning to deal with the process of attention-demand in their own way, and they may set the tone for the future. As Boomers have proven, a single generation of young people can dictate trends in our society. Now, Generation “Y” – children born after 1976 – have grown up learning to multitask. They can easily give their attention to different sources, and do so on a regular basis.

The consequence of this learned behavior is that they seem to have much less tolerance for lack of focus. The product has to be “right” immediately or they move on. This group, destined to be 41% of the population by 2008, has learned to cope with the demands on their attention by making decisions very quickly based on initial impressions.

As the level of attention-demand increases, people learn to deal with it by making attention-allocation decisions faster, and with less hard information. Emotional attachments are much more important and first impressions are critical. This type of usage will become the norm, and radio can not let itself become “the old technology” by failing to keep pace.

Radio’s “secret weapon” is Personality. Air talent and the stationality we inject between the music have long been necessary elements in winning the ratings battle. While the personalities in the radio business have always had to compete with stars in other media, the future will likely present even more competition, from attention-seekers beyond traditional media, for a place in the consumer’s storehouse of “my favorite personalities.”

The Internet is a burgeoning example of personality driven media. What started out as a basic system of disseminating information among government agencies and educational institutions has become a forum for very personal expression. As long as *some* attention is being paid to an entity in this new economy that entity is “in business” and competing with you for someone’s attention.



In the Attention Economy the truly “rich” are stars; those to whom an inordinate amount of attention is paid. The average radio listener doesn't just know stars from radio, television, movies, literature and politics. People become stars today simply by being successful. The Wall Street Journal recently noted that “CEOs are stars now” – Bill Gates means more than Microsoft. These highly compensated executives work within their companies as attention-getting motivators, in addition to their more traditional roles. Think about it – which 3 letters mean more to you today, C-B-S or M-E-L?

The Attention Economy puts enormous pressure on anyone desiring attention to hit the target quickly. Even with the plethora of entertainment and information options, people are not tuning out; they are paying attention. The question is -- are they paying attention to **you**?

