



“We’ll Be Right Back After This”

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"More music and fewer commercials."

"10 songs in a row."

"We only stop for commercials twice each hour!"

These familiar statements are related by one common goal -- an attempt to make listeners believe that a certain radio station plays less commercials than the competition. Certainly, most programmers we know envision their listeners poised with a loaded gun (their index finger) ready to hit the scan button the very second they hear a spot. Of course, for every "paranoid" PD there's a sales manager or GM who feels that this fear is out of proportion.

Well, pardner, the gun is loaded!

According to a nationwide study by Paragon Research, 80% of listeners surveyed will "sometimes or always" switch stations when they hear commercials. Given that finding, and the fact that advertising revenue is the lifeblood of our business, what is the best strategy for reducing the level of inevitable tuneout?

To begin with, a station must meet the challenge of the marketplace. As a general rule, a successful station will at least stay within the market norm. If the key competitors in your market play ten spots per hour, then a good defense would be to play no more than ten spots per hour yourself.

If you want to play offense, you could gain an advantage by reducing the apparent spotload, thereby exceeding listener expectations. When devising a strategy to reduce potential commercial tuneout, the question becomes one of spot distribution. In other words, is the biggest problem the number of spots or the number of stopsets?

At DeMers Programming, we've been inclined to encourage our client stations to reduce the number of interruptions per hour as the primary mechanism for convincing listeners that the station is carrying a lighter spotload. This advice is supported by other evidence from the Paragon study.



Listeners were asked their preference as to which they would rather listen to: "A radio station that plays longer sets of music and has less frequent but longer commercial breaks" or "A radio station that plays shorter sets of music and has more frequent but shorter periods of commercial breaks." The station with fewer breaks was preferred by a more than two to one margin. (see figure 1)

Of course, the tradeoff with fewer stopsets is determining the number of commercials that listeners will sit through before pulling the trigger. From the study, 31% of those surveyed tune out immediately or after just one commercial. (see figure 2) By the second spot, 59% of the respondents say they've made the switch. A little more than a third of the audience will sit through three or more commercials in a row. Since most contemporary music formatted stations play at least three spots in each break, the downside of another unit or so is not that dramatic. The key is to balance the load against the number of times that you stop the music for commercials.

Before you start the internal debate about restructuring breaks and dropping units, one caveat. Don't forget the budget! Every station has financial needs and objectives. It is critical that your commercial structure be sponsor friendly enough to accommodate both the realities of the marketplace and the goals of your radio station.

<i>Which one would you rather listen to?</i>	
A radio station that plays longer sets of music and has less frequent but longer periods of commercial breaks?	70%
A radio station that plays shorter sets of music but has more frequent but shorter periods of commercial breaks?	30%

figure 1

<i>How many commercials, if any, would you say you typically listen to before changing radio stations?</i>	
None. Switch before commercial.	7%
One	24%
Two	28%
Three	15%
Four or more	7%
Never switch	18%

figure 2

