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# Dealing With The Clutter

Cleaning up radio's act will serve programming and sales

Over the last several weeks we've been discussing the state of Rock in 2005. This week Alex DeMers, President of DeMers Programming, offers his thoughts on Rock's biggest challenge beyond music, morning shows and marketing: clutter.

According to DeMers, it's not just the reality of too many spots, weak production or excessive and poorly prepped jock chatter. "The fact that the major broadcasting companies have made clutter the issue for 2005 makes it every radio station's problem," he says. "That means Rockers, along with all stations, need to pay critical attention and re-evaluate all nonmusic and nonentertainment elements on their stations."

## Sound The Alarm

For more than five years DeMers Programming has been sounding the alarm bell that clutter would adversely affect radio use. "After the years of pressure that Wall Street put on the public companies to grow revenue at all costs, we have reached a tipping point," says DeMers. "It is our belief that no issue is more immediately critical to broadcasters than recently initiated policies to control clutter on radio stations at the group-ownership level."

While DeMers is thrilled that many major broadcast companies are now taking steps to control clutter, he remains concerned about those in the business who don't think they share this problem. "It is our sense that many managers still feel clutter control is a nonissue for their operations," he says. "This is because their station, cluster or group has maintained good inventory control over recent years, while some competitors were less responsible in this regard."

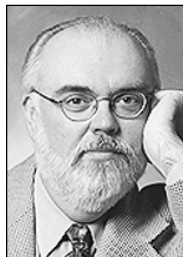
DeMers feels that the growing perception out there in the real world is that radio is a cluttered medium as a whole — not just on a handful of radio stations. "As far as radio listeners and advertisers are concerned, when the largest broadcast companies acknowledge a problem, that paints every radio station with the same brush," he says.

"If your station, cluster or group has not addressed the clutter issue in some manner up to this point, you'd better get on it. If you share our belief that radio has an industrywide perceptual problem, what can and should you do about it?"

## Defining Clutter

What is clutter, anyway? "From a product perspective, clutter is anything that takes away from the listener's positive experience," DeMers says. "While some may feel that is an oversimplification, the truth is that this is how listeners perceive radio. To them we are a utility whose job is to entertain and inform, period."

"Obviously, we cannot eliminate from our stations everything that any individual listener would deem clutter; we'd be broadcasting dead



Alex DeMers

air. But we can improve our stations by cleaning up our act."

DeMers is convinced that tackling the problem effectively at the local level requires management's blessing. "This is a problem that needs to be addressed on a stationwide or cluster-wide basis," he says. "This is not just a sales or programming issue."

"The two poles of the radio station each need to take responsibility for their fair share of the problem and work together to devise practical solutions that benefit the entire station or market cluster."

"But before you get into counting spots and timing breaks, it's important to get a good sense of the local playing field. First, review your ratings and research. How does your station stack up in terms of the competitive environment? Is there anything in the data pointing to a potential issue with spotloads or too much talk?"

"After that review it's quite possible that many managers still would not perceive the need for any change at their radio stations. That's great, but there's another level to all this. Unfortunately, the challenge is not simply a matter of determining if you may have a clutter problem now, it is also a matter of determining what the future may bring. Will you soon develop a perceived clutter problem due to changes in the competitive environment?"

## A Cluttered Perception?

DeMers says that no radio station in any market can operate without acknowledging this issue. "As other stations in your market deploy anti-clutter tactics, reduce spotloads or change spot deployment, you are now almost forced to get into the game," he says. "The acts of individual stations change the collective perception of the medium across the market."

DeMers says it will be months before research projects yield evidence of a station moving the needle in listeners' minds in terms of clutter-reduction, but a little improvement in this area could go a long way. He says, "Conventional wisdom suggests that at least one station in a market, and perhaps one per format, will be successful in improving its images in this regard simply by telling listeners that it has been proactively combating clutter."

"The acknowledgment of this issue as a negative for radio makes it a problem for the radio industry across the board, not just individual operators. Some of these clutter-busting initiatives have become national news. The perception being driven home is that all radio is cluttered, so be prepared."

## Questioning Clutter

DeMers Programming has developed this checklist of suggestions for your consideration when examining clutter. These questions are divided into "sales" and "programming" for each department to review as part of the process of developing your own anti-clutter initiatives.

### Sales

- **Is there a station policy on commercial inventory?** Define a limit on total commercial load, and make sure everyone clearly understands and implements the policy — including what to do when that limit is reached.
- **Do you have a policy concerning commercial quality?** The goal should be to create quality commercial messages that complement the station's programming product. Clients who insist on doing their own spots may change their minds if they are presented with creative options.
- **Do value-added mentions really add value?** Is there a rule of thumb that determines the amount of value-added promotion you will provide that takes into account the size of the order?
- **Do you have consistent policies on billboards and live tags?** Tags were once simply "Brought to you by Fred's Taco Hut." These days it's "Brought to you by Fred's Taco Hut at 239 Canondega Way off of Route 34, behind the Wal-Mart." You get the idea.
- **Have your live endorsements outlived their usefulness?** We're running out of disc jockeys who need to lose weight or get laser surgery. Unless you are using a major station personality, these endorsements often come across as insincere chatter.
- **Are sponsorships weighing you down?** Your station was doing a feature, and you'd get someone to sponsor it. Now we're often asked to provide ideas to stations that need a feature for the 10 o'clock hour simply to meet sponsorship demands, not programming goals.
- **Are your remote broadcasts even remotely interesting?** Poor technical quality, poor controls on live personality breaks and unprepared client content can conspire to drive away listeners — and potential customers.
- **Are you manufacturing clutter with weak sales promotions?** There was a time when these were described as "no-charge 30-second commercials," but now they are often referred to as sales promos. It is important that there be a consistent review and approval process that works across both the sales and programming departments.

### Programming

- **Have you reviewed the program log recently?** Do you know exactly what nonmusical elements are scheduled on your station hour by hour over the course of a day? Is everything on the air for a good reason?
- **Are station promos produced for maximum impact?** Taking 60 seconds to tell a story that you could adequately tell in 30 seconds is not a good idea. If you have a big promotion with a lot of moving parts, produce several versions of a promo: one to catch listeners' interest, one to explain the details.
- **Do your sweepers and liners deliver a streamlined message that's brand appropriate?** Be careful to construct copy that isn't too busy or overwritten. Take the time to write — and rewrite — for clarity and brevity.
- **Does your airstaff practice good word economy?** Most listeners will tell you that they want the music, not useless chatter. Have your airstaff prep for maximum impact and entertainment value with minimum words.
- **Who's got the time, traffic, weather?** In morning drive, tell us the time and if it's going to rain, and give us traffic. Outside of that, if your station is not built that way, don't reach. Meet the expectations of listeners, and stay with your strengths.
- **Are you winning with contests and games?** Whether playing for Arbitron or playing for clients, be sure that your games are entertaining for everyone. Contesting that has narrow appeal or does not match the attitude of your brand is creating tune-out potential.
- **Are all your barter spots necessary?** Many stations have agreements to run commercials in exchange for some sort of information service or syndicated programming. Justify why each barter spot is on the air.
- **What's with all the bad songs?** Playing a bad song is like sending an embossed invitation to tune out. Manage your music for maximum TSL.

## Taking Inventory

To get a handle on the scope of your particular challenge, DeMers suggests you take inventory of what's really happening on the air at your radio station. He says, "How many units and minutes of nonentertainment content are you really running per hour? Don't leave out anything. Write it down, and get ready to negotiate."

"While it's relatively easy to point out sales clutter, some of it is just plain necessary for the economic viability of the station. Often, programming clutter can be more insidious, dangerous and, frankly, easier to fix."

"The challenge is to implement change — and do it now. Don't wait for the other guys to lighten their spotload or streamline their pro-

motional announcements. Take a hard look at every nonentertainment element on the station, make the call on what to dump and what to keep, then follow through. Learning there is a problem and not doing anything about it is a useless exercise."

DeMers is challenging the industry to deal with the clutter issue now and for the long haul ahead. "Reducing inventory, changing remote-broadcast policies and controlling superfluous jock talk are all difficult challenges," he says. "Many of the really hard choices have the potential to cost money in the short run."

"The goal here is to gauge that cost against the potential for long-term erosion in listenership and, ultimately, abandonment of our medium for other, less-cluttered options."