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by David Giovannoni
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MANAGING PROGRAMMING CHANGE

When the Press Plays to the Piqued

by David Giovannoni

*Contrary to popular opinion, Jack Mitchell does not have horns...does not breath sulphur, has no pointed tail, and (we, therefore, assume) his middle name is not Lucifer.
—John Kovalic, Wisconsin State Journal, Nov. 8, 1990.*

No one enjoys depiction as the devil incarnate. No one fancies a fistfight on the air. But programming change can engender such assaults; listeners take the loss of programs personally.

Programming change is inevitable. Programmers and managers would be derelict in their duties if they didn't anticipate or react to changing tastes, styles, listening patterns, and competition. Yet when one program replaces another, some listeners experience withdrawal. They'll seek the old program and when they can't get it they'll seek revenge. Those listeners adept at enjoining the press will do so by claiming the abuse of airwaves, the misapplication of public monies, and the abrogation of commitments to members.

Managing public reaction can be the toughest part of implementing programming change. The public and the press are rarely willing or able to understand the complex media environment, the technical details, or the managerial goals that contribute to programming decisions. Yet professional duties require explaining and defending unpopular actions.

A whole seminar could be conducted on how — and how not — to manage public reaction to programming change. Here's a short list of ideas based on my own observations.

Telling the Story

The true story, of course, is that nothing stays the same in radio. People's tastes change. So does the competition. A station that doesn't change with the times is doomed to a slow but certain demise.

- It's okay to tell the true story. Who can look at the graph showing Wisconsin Public Radio's shrinking audience service in Madison and not conclude that programming changes are in order? In 1989 these stations serve fewer than half of the listeners they did in 1985. The programming hadn't changed; but people's preferences had, and other stations had already adapted.
- Diffuse charges of demagoguery by demonstrating that listeners have been consulted. Arbitron's sample, member surveys, and focus groups talk to hundreds if not thousands of listeners. These people paint a much better picture of reality than the pissed-off prof who puts ads in the paper rallying others to join his personal crusade.
- Avoid statistical mumbo-jumbo and calls to the Arbitron authority. Public radio listeners hate ratings. They believe public radio is (or should be) a refuge from ratings. Anyway, Arbitron ratings are simply assessments of how well

stations serve listeners. Ratings only inform decisions; they're not the *reason* one decides to alter programming.

- Similarly, *never* let the phrases “bigger audience” or “more listeners” pass your lips while explaining your actions. These words beg, and perhaps deserve, accusations of “selling out” and stooping to “the least common denominator.” Although more listeners and bigger audiences should result, they too are not the *reason* programming is changing.
- State the reasons for change in *public service* terms. *Public service* is the issue at the heart of most programming changes. Jack Mitchell put it well in explaining WPR's moves:

“We're not talking about fundamental changes in the organization. We're talking about fine-tuning the elements we already have and making them better. *We're looking to improve service. The best possible service* will receive the most support over the long run.” [italics added]

When programming drops below an acceptable level of service to the public, management must fine-tune it or replace it with something else. Listeners may not understand your decisions; but they should understand there's a limit to how few listeners a station can serve.

- Take responsibility. Don't blame programming changes on your consultants. Not only does it smack of buck-passing, it casts a shadow over your own resolve.
- Distance yourself from your consultants. Popular opinion ranks consultants, particularly those bearing ratings, lower than lawyers, equal to arms dealers, and

almost as low as John Keating. People blame consultants for the state of commercial television programming, the decline of quality electronic journalism, and the decay of American culture in general. Like ratings, consultants are not authorities to cite — no matter how much they guided your decisions.

- Draw attention to the quality of the new programming. Listeners and journalists often believe that *quality* of content is being sacrificed for *quantity* of listeners. If new programming's quality doesn't exceed what it's replacing, then maybe everything people are saying and writing about you is true. But if the quality is there, then the programming stands as its own best defense.

Besides attempting to minimize public discontent, prepare to express your regrets publicly, extend your sympathy to angry callers and letter writers, and explain to your family why friends no longer come to visit. Change is hard. Assuming responsibility for it is harder. But both come with the job. A careful and professional approach to the public and press will ease and speed the transition.

David Giovannoni heads Audience Research Analysis, an independent firm specializing in radio audience research. The Corporation for Public Broadcasting funded this report. Opinions expressed are the author's and do not necessarily reflect opinions or policies of the corporation. The author wishes to thank Wisconsin Public Radio for allowing the use of its materials.

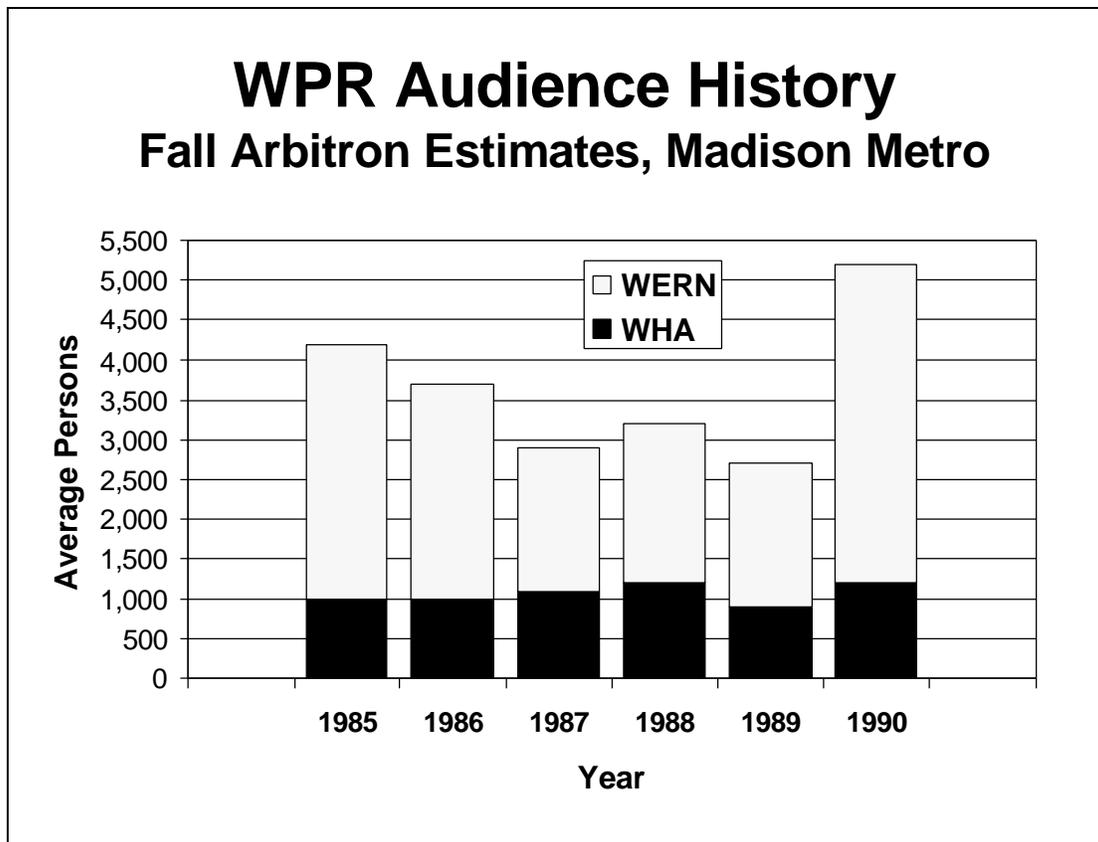
Q. How many WPR listeners does it take to change a light bulb?

A. Two. One to change the light bulb, and one to write dissenting articles about it.

Between 1985 and 1989, the average audience to WPR's Madison stations decreased by more than half. After extensive research and deliberation, management moved *Morning Edition* from WHA-AM to WERN-FM at the expense of WERN's classical music between 6:00 and 8:00 a.m.

Unhappy staff leaked the news of this and other upcoming changes to reporters, who immediately began writing sympathetic articles. Disgruntled listeners organized; classical vigilantes ran ads orchestrating their discontent; a few tied up phone lines in protest during the following pledge drive.

By reading the papers you would guess no one was happy. Almost no listeners came to WPR's defense. But they did come to its programming. Within two months WERN-FM's audience more than doubled. Indeed, the first sweep after the change it ranked number one in share among public radio stations in the nation. WHA-AM's audience was holding steady. And although membership renewals declined as anticipated, income from new members more than offset this loss.



WPR Audience History

Spring Arbitron Estimates, Madison TSA

