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by David Giovannoni
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KNPR used to go with the first caller, and they had trouble. Now they're up to the third or fourth caller, but they're lucky to get one caller. I called once and I was the first caller, so I called back, I was the second caller; then I was the third caller. And she said call back hurry, and I won a stereo amp.
— *KNPR Focus Group Participant*

Commercial stations run contests to boost their ratings artificially. Contests manipulate listeners by requiring them to stay tuned longer or to tune in at certain times. It's been suggested that public broadcasters might employ the manipulative powers of contests to introduce people to our programming. "If the contest can get people to listen" says the argument, "maybe they'll like what they hear and become regular listeners." It seems worth a try.

Now, after several years of running on-air contests, a public station has concluded that contests have not played a major role in increasing its audience. In fact, the contests were hardly noticed by the station's listeners.

Contests may have other uses, but audience-building is not one of them.

These are the findings of *Public Radio Contests: A Discussion And Guide*, written by John Stark and distributed by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting. The report is an outcome of a 1988 CPB Radio Audience Building Fund grant to KNPR in Las Vegas and describes the procedures and pitfalls of conducting on-air contests in detail. It's a handbook for stations considering contests, but aren't exactly sure how to pull it off.

In 1988, when this project began, KNPR's audience had been declining for several years. It decided to try contests as an audience-building tactic (when in Las Vegas...). In preparation, the station hired George Bailey of Walrus Research to do a thorough analysis of its audience data and to moderate a round of member focus groups. His straightforward conclusion: the station's programming was causing the decline in audience service, and no contest could address this problem. He wrote:

Contests will have a minimal impact on KNPR's audience. The direct way to build audience and thereby increase revenue is through formatics, rather than contests.

As Stark writes, "the futility of a poorly programmed station with limited appeal trying to build audience with contests and giveaways" was clear to management. It suspended its contest plans in order to focus its format on its strengths. It put more emphasis on news by extending *Morning Edition* and instating *Weekend Edition*. It strengthened its classical format and dropped most other music programs. It went so far as to give a college station its jazz, blues, and folk resources – not just the records, but program hosts as well.

Made late in 1989, these programming changes had an immediate effect on listening. By spring 1990 listening had nearly doubled over the previous year.

As Stark writes, “only after a major overhaul did we feel confident in proceeding with the contest project.” And proceed it did. The station learned in its first round of focus groups that listeners would probably not object to contests if they were done with taste.

We air-checked and monitored radio contests from all over the country. We examined prize structure, method of entry, legal restrictions, how to most effectively engage listeners in contests, and on-air approaches to contests.

The station designed and executed contests. It learned many operational lessons – how to do a contest, what to strive for, what to avoid and so forth. The report’s presentation of these lessons is by far its strongest part. In addition, the station learned what listeners thought when it convened a second round of focus groups. Stark writes:

After investing considerable time and effort into contests, we were surprised to find they had little perceptual effect on listeners. No one brought up contests without a prompt!

Contests – at least these contests – had no negative effect on listeners.

But did they have any positive effect on listening? on listeners? on members? Unfortunately, the study forges no hard links between contests and listening, listeners, or members. The possibility remains open that contests may have accelerated listeners’ discovery of the revised programming. Or that they helped turn listeners into members. Or that they may have turned off listeners sub-

sequent to the focus groups. But these possibilities remain untested.

Indeed, Stark clearly feels the programming changes made in fall 1989 account for virtually all of the audience growth, and that anyone interested in contests must first put their programming house in order.

KNPR proceeded to design and execute more contests, but this time with goals less explicitly audience-building oriented, [and instead] directed more toward positioning, building good will with listeners, developing prospect lists and generating revenue.

Management undertook contests for reasons other than to build audience. Unfortunately, the report stops short of linking contests to the meeting of these goals. Opinions are offered; but no objective results are presented to support them.

You don’t need a grant from CPB to study the effects of contests. If you feel they are an appropriate technique for your station, the KNPR report will help. It’s packed with useful tips about designing and administering contests – picking the theme, setting the odds, laying out the rules, obtaining the prize, establishing and sticking to a budget, and so forth. KNPR has done a fine job of presenting its extensive experience to its colleagues.

If, as the report suggests, you undertake contests to build good will with listeners, help position the station in a crowded media environment, involve the community and so forth, then you would be wise to measure objectively how well these goals are being met. Otherwise, you may end up richer for the contest experience, but without a clear understanding of its effects on your station’s listeners or members.

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port. Opinions expressed in it are the author's and do not necessarily reflect opinions or policies of the corporation.

Are Contests Appropriate For Public Radio?

Commercial stations know that well-designed and executed on-air contests can have significant short-term impacts on the ratings. But given the differences between commercial and noncommercial radio, we must ask if contests are appropriate for public radio.

Contests are intended to manipulate listeners' use of a station by requiring them to listen for extended and/or specific periods of time. When people listen to a station longer, its average audience and share increase; when people listen more often, cume and ratings rise. Larger reported ratings allow commercial stations to charge advertisers more money. The net result is increased profit.

How do these purposes translate to public radio?

Public radio lacks commercial radio's direct return on investment mechanism. It has underwriting, of course, but how many public stations sell underwriting on an explicit cost-per-thousand basis? How many work with agencies or national reps who can help them exploit a good ratings book?

Instead, public broadcasters measure returns in terms of listener support – a direct reflection of audience service (more satisfied listeners more often). Public radio fulfills its public service mission only when it provides programming of significance to a significant audience. Real and lasting enhancements in audience service and member satisfaction are appropriate measures of success in public radio – not advertising revenues.

Can on-air contests introduce listeners to programming? Can they accelerate the process of discovery? Can they enhance the station's service to its listeners and members? And if they can, are they more cost-effective than other techniques? How much does it cost to add one person to the weekly cume? How much does a contest-induced listener-hour cost? How much new-member income does a contest return? All of these are objective returns on investment. And to be truly valuable, there must be a long-term effect.

Experiments with contests should stringently determine the degree to which the contests themselves increase audience service and support – both in the short and long term.

Contests' artificial manipulation of ratings must be reconciled to this end if they are to become appropriate techniques for public broadcasters.

— adapted from *Radio Intelligence*, February 1989