

Format Update: Adult Contemporary

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“Can you hear me now?”

One of the great things about AC radio is its stability of the listener base. It is a format that listeners “grow into”. It’s not uncommon to hear women in focus groups say “*I don’t know what happened, but I had my first child and now I love my mom’s radio station*”. It continues to be a strong 25-54, female based format with the “core” of 35-49. The format has traditionally been strongest with at work listening (which is also the key to attracting the 25-34 portion of the demo).

Satellite, mp3, I-Pods, CD’s....How do we stay on top?

Key words. “Stay connected”. Research and marketing are more critical than ever. Unfortunately, in many markets, we appear to be doing less of both in these financially challenged times. In my markets that still do their research and marketing, we are able to produce not only great ratings, but consistently good ratings.

What still works with research and how often does it need to be done? This may not be the answer you want to hear, but here we go!

- **Music Tests:** Twice a year. Once in fall and once in spring. It’s easy for a manager to tell a programmer “You know what to play, why you need research”. Nothing could be further from the truth. This is your million dollar radio station you’re talking about.
- **Perceptual Research:** Once a year. Your market is changing at an alarming pace as are the options for listeners. You go to the doctor for an annual check up. Why would you not do the same thing for your station? Example. Most morning shows revolve content around show business-pop culture topics. Would it surprise you to know that most AC listeners have a very LOW desire for this? Its right down there with sports reports and stories, yet it’s all over the radio.
- **Focus Groups:** This is how you really get the “vibe” of your market. You’ll also learn how listeners use the radio and what your “brand” means to them. In many of my markets we now do focus groups the same night we do music tests.
- **On-line research:** Invite your database members to take a survey about your radio station. Sure, you have some competitors in there, but they will not outweigh the regular folks.

AC listeners are on-line, but be smart...Keep it simple!

Digital is the buzzword of the day, but AC listeners are not always the first in line with the hi-tech movement! Most AC people are just starting to grasp the concept of listening to the radio on their computers. I love that you can now listen to any CBS radio station via AOL. This truly shows where the digital movement is going. Note

to programmers. Listeners don't get what "streaming" means. That is our word. They do get "listen on your computer". When doing promos for listening on-line, keep it simple. "Did you know you can now listen to WAAA on your computer just like you do on the radio"?

As with all websites, yours will get hits as long as it is perceived to be a place that has fresh and useful information other than pictures of the jocks or ads for advertisers. What works?

- **Follow up on topics your morning show discussed.** It sounds great when your morning show can say "If you missed any part of this, just go to LITE1003.com for a complete list".
- **Have podcasts of all interviews, funny moments, and special shows.** One of my client stations does a noon time feature every weekday. As soon as it's over, they post on their website for listeners to hear at their leisure. Plus, they keep them archived so listeners can go to any cast they may have missed.
- **Discount Coupons.** In every focus group I do, we discuss what listeners want from radio station websites. I run every possible idea past them and do you know what always comes up as most important? Discount coupons. Put coupons on your website for local merchants, and watch you're hits go up.
- **Click to websites of interest to your female core.** Sites that specialize in relationships, family matters, health and weight/diet control. Want to know what women are interested in? Watch Oprah and pay attention to what she is talking about. "Having a rough time with your husband or boyfriend? Check out 5 tips on how to fix it. Just click on the relationship tab at www.litefm.com.

Email is king. My research shows that over 80% of AC listeners access the internet more than twice a day to check email. Having an email database of listeners and communicating with them on a frequent and useful basis is important in these days of small, if any, marketing budgets.

- **Get permission.** Invite them to join on the air. Offer them the chance to sign up at station appearances, client locations & the front desk of the station.
- **Do not spam.** E-mails that say "Here's what's going on at WBBB" are deadly. The listener does not care. It's a sure way to have them unsubscribe. What works? **The WIFM Factor:** Include what I call "The WIFM (what's in it for me) factor" in your email. Make them an offer that only members of the email club can take advantage of. This says their chances of winning are better than "The 9th caller". Contesting can be very effective. Example: Offer \$100 for a "song of the day" only for email people. Send them a special coupon that is good for a substantial discount, or even better a freebee. "Take this coupon to your local Kroger store for a free \$20 in groceries". Your listeners will love it, and the client will truly see the value of radio!

You've come a long way, baby!

Whether it's soft, mainstream, or Fresh, AC today is the predominant music format for adult females. Workday listening remains the target of today's AC. But before mid days even begin, there is importance (and quarter hours) in mornings and nights. Many AC's have strongly rated morning shows with big morning numbers, leading to great at work ratings. Every successful AC station has a strong night show, hosted by a dominant personality. Nights may not be the most important daypart for selling, but it sure is for imaging and branding of your station.

AC always was, and always will be a gold-based format. It demands not only a familiar sound, but also a comfortable one. Here are tips for putting your music base together:

- It's about the song, not the year it was recorded. There are still lots of 70s and even some evergreen 60s sounds that work in AC.
- Keep the tempo even. AC is used as a familiar background service to many. Do not construct a station that is only tempo driven.
- Follow your music research. It won't take you off course.

As the demo evolves, the younger end continues to bring in the more contemporary sounds. The challenge, as it always has been is to balance the younger and upper listeners of the demo with mass appeal songs that appeal to both.

Excuse me...I need directions to a healthy AC future in a complex world!

Today's AC's are combinations of the right music, innovative promotions, personalities that are able to establish on air relationships with the listener and of course, are well marketed. Many listeners today still refer to AC's as "Easy Listening". It's the format women use to unwind and relax, & be comfortable with. Keeping your AC the station they depend on for familiar, comfortable music that helps them unwind is the #1 road to future growth. Here are a few predictions as we go forward.

- **Personalities will return to AM and PM drives.** We need content that cannot be reproduced easily by an IPOD or computer. What better way than having fun compelling personalities. Some stations that have the "voice guy" on more than the jocks. But there is a warning here. Personality does not mean talk for talk sake. It will take talented, well educated and prepared jocks to pull this off on AC radio. After all, we are radio stations "with a personality" not a station "that is all about personality!"
- **Local is important, but it's got to be quality local that matters.** Let's remember that local is all over your commercials, traffic reports and jock raps. Every listener craves a connection to their community. Little things like town mentions, calling off the name of a local merchant are easy ways to keep connected locally.

When Ron Chapman was the #1 morning show in Dallas-Ft Worth he taught me a great trick. Turning a traffic report into a great local mention. He would tell you that there was an accident slowing traffic at Central Expressway and Insurance Lane. It really got local when he said "the car is right across from the McDonalds on Insurance Lane".

- **Two, 7 Minute stop sets should stop.** Have you noticed that when internet sites run commercials they are usually 15-30 seconds? When we first began with the idea of only having 2 stop sets, we ran 8-10 units. Now that we are way above that our stop sets are getting unbearable. If you're going to run 12-14 minutes an hour, break them up into three stop sets.

How might electronic measurement affect the format? So far, PPM is showing AC looking very strong in the ratings. Much of the "phantom cume" that we have been aware of is showing up with electronic measurement.

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