

BRAINSTORMING WITH PROGRAM DIRECTORS

Ideas to Grow the Audience from the PRPD Conference

The 2008 Public Radio Programming Conference, sponsored by the Public Radio Program Directors Association (PRPD), provided a great opportunity to explore ideas for audience growth. In addition to meeting with the PRPD board and members of emerging project groups, we had a Grow the Audience general conference session with over 150 program directors and assorted producers, managers, and network staff.

This report summarizes ideas and recommendations from the general session, followed by verbatim responses for those interested in a “deep dive.” It is important to remember that this discussion occurred well into a large conference, and followed various keynotes, exhortations, and marketing pitches – and our own Grow the Audience presentation. There are clear echoes of these influences in what follows. But we also think the ideas outlined here are a fair read on the current “state of the field” among station program decision-makers, highlighting both where this group is already prepared to act for audience growth and the context within which other ideas would be considered.

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The Grow the Audience session began with a briefing on the project and key research findings to date. PRPD President Arthur Cohen and board member Jackie Souter spoke of the alignment of Grow the Audience with the PRPD strategic plan and of PRPD’s intent to be a strong partner in systemwide audience growth efforts.

The bulk of the session was devoted to small group discussions of three broad questions. The first two questions focused more on the respondents’ individual organizations and elicited ideas that were topically wide ranging and potentially powerful in cumulative impact if most of the ideas were actually implemented. The third question, which asked about larger projects or initiatives, yielded more powerful and strategic ideas, but with less clarity about who would be the prime actor.

Wider Use and Deeper Value . . . Right Now

We first asked the PDs to identify “two or three important things your station or organization can do, right now, that would lead to wider use and deeper value for your audience.” Ideas ranged across several broad categories, with the largest number of proposals clustering in programming and community connections.

Specific programming ideas centered on being “brilliant on the basics of good radio” – critical listening and air checking, best practices, improved on-air performance – and strengthening local news programming. Interestingly, almost none of the programming measures involved a specific program change, such as hiring or firing a host or adding or dropping a specific program – although some observers noted that such steps are unlikely to be announced in this setting. Also absent were any

proposed interactions with networks and national producers, which may seem too difficult to address by a single station.

The group surfaced three broad themes related to closer, richer community connections: more outreach and engagement with the community, specific connections and social networking around news programming, and partnerships with community organizations.

Options to increase diversity and inclusiveness began with people – greater diversity in staff, senior management, board members, and guests. Several PDs suggested “new service” for new and different audiences.

Almost every small group called for increased marketing and promotion as an important step toward audience growth – a theme that has emerged in almost every Grow the Audience consultation. Other ideas included steps to improve organizational development and effectiveness such as better planning and attention to strategy, better intra-station and inter-station communication.

Ideas around new media and online services were sparse. A couple of groups flagged less on-air fundraising.

Five Years Out . . . If You Could Change One Thing

We next asked the participants to “think over the long-term, five years out or more. If you could change one thing, at your own organization or elsewhere, to grow the audience for public radio, what would that be?”

Responses to this second question largely tracked with those to the first, but with ideas becoming somewhat more ambitious in scale and scope. Programming ideas, for example, shifted from “brilliant on the basics” and best practices toward expanding and strengthening original local content and improving mid-day performance.

Organizational development ideas also clearly moved up a notch, with ideas such as acquiring an additional station, building a talent pool, reorganizing the staff to meet new media demands, and developing new distribution models.

Ideas to increase diversity and inclusiveness and to increase marketing and promotion also received considerable attention, but essentially restated earlier points.

In contrast, suggestions for community connections and online services were significantly fewer in number. Perhaps the “one thing” focus to the question moved them off the top priority list. Ideas to overhaul our fundraising model also resurfaced.

The second question surfaced two suggestions for networks: that NPR hire a Program Director with the power to act and that NPR and APM develop alternative program streams to reach different audiences.

Larger Projects and Initiatives

A final question to the group asked for “larger projects or initiatives . . . to grow the audience? More effort on something already underway? Something entirely new?”

Programming ideas included new national programs with specific targets such as weekend listening, involvement of the audience (e.g. StoryCorps), or Hispanic listeners. Programming responses also included more sharing of content, more training (with some specific mention of NPR's Local News Initiative and Morning Edition Grad School), talent development, expansion of the Public Insight Journalism effort, and a re-visiting of 'core values' concepts.

The organizational development agenda centered on training and technical support, but also included exhortations to the Grow the Audience project itself to get people involved, include smaller stations, and communicate with the system.

Two new areas emerged in response to this question. Participants outlined an audience research agenda that includes deeper research in individual markets, perceptual studies, music research, exploration of target audiences, web intelligence, and exploration of cultural barriers to public radio use.

Increases in our collective delivery capacity attracted considerable attention – new channels for multiple formats in every major market, more platforms for more formats, and more frequencies and bandwidth generally.

The other areas mentioned earlier – community connections, diversity and inclusiveness, marketing and promotion, online services, and fundraising – all saw a few specific suggestions for major projects.

Complete verbatim responses to all three questions are attached. Those to the third question are especially worth a read.

- Tom Thomas and Terry Clifford
September 23, 2008

PRPD CONFERENCE GROW THE AUDIENCE SESSION QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

Question 1. What are two or three important things your station or organization can do, right now, that would lead to wider use and deeper value for your audience?

These verbatim responses are from summaries of small group discussions.

PROGRAMMING

EXECUTION

- Be brilliant on the basics of good radio
- Basic air checking
- Application of best practices
- Improve on-air skills of staff
- Improve talent performance
- Get current staff to be authentic and relevant
- Sound more energetic and more human while retaining core values
- Review of what we do - critically listening to the station
- Microformatics
- Push "Morning Edition Grad School" to other dayparts

LOCAL NEWS

- Hire Morning Edition producer
- Growing local news department
- Increase local news emphasis
- Localization
- More community-focused programming
- Improve quality of news programming with emphasis on excellence and depth
- Use our existing listener database - contact them and ask what stories we are missing

PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT

- Making better use of the content we produce
- Take more risks in program development and stay with them
- "Open the doors" to showcase local producers
- Music library digitization

COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS

OUTREACH AND ENGAGEMENT

- Get out into the community – leave the building
 - More outreach events and community involvement
 - Have an in person presence in places we haven't been before and go there more than once
 - Actively engaging audience both inside and outside station walls
 - More active engagement with the audience (social networking both online and in person)
 - Open houses - literally open the doors
 - Merge with communities, promote what we do to them
 - Community engagement - first through the organization then to the community
- #### CONNECTIONS AROUND NEWS
- Involve community more with news
 - Social networking around news stories
 - Grow online social component – become more relevant
 - Be more relevant in the lives of our community

PARTNERSHIPS

- Deeper relationships with other community groups
- Partnering with other organizations to enhance audience reach
- Explore and strengthen partnerships with outside organizations
- Enhance audience identification with stations (i.e. My Source)

DIVERSITY, INCLUSIVENESS

PERSONNEL

- More serious resolve and effort to recruit new voices to our organizations, to bring different views and skills
- Continue hiring diverse hosting staff, bringing individual talents to the air
- Greater diversity of race and age - staffing, on-air, guests, etc.
- Younger, more diverse staff to explore radio/web mashup
- Boards and senior management more diverse
- Diversity training for staff and board

AUDIENCE TARGETS

- Reach a younger and diverse audience
- Starting new service for new audience
- Identify unserved audiences in market and target new services to them

PROGRAMMING

- Look and sound more like our community
- Produce local, undercovered voice and talent

MARKETING AND PROMOTION

- Better marketing so that more people know who we are and what we do
- Off-air marketing activities
- Increase marketing
- Emphasize marketing to listeners more
- Intensive promotional campaign
- Off-air public awareness campaign
- Marketing to audience (whoever that might be)
- Embrace non-traditional marketing (viral, e-blasts)
- Better use of stations' most valuable asset (their air) to get people to return again and again – more occasions

ORGANIZATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

- Set measurable and realistic goals
- Staff understands mission and making strategic decisions
- Focus efforts on strategic goals
- Better communication between programming departments
- Share all research and data with everyone in the organization and provide a mechanism for staff to share ideas
- Be more efficient in the completion of our tasks
- Think out of the box
- Get the right staff and staffing levels for our responsibilities
- Think system-wide when beginning projects
- Share more freely with the system

ONLINE SERVICE

- Facilitate discussion of issues on our website
- New media lab to find a way into new media landscape
- Doable online community
- Sharpen the focus of our online outreach
- Overhaul website
- More platforms

FUNDRAISING

- Develop greater off-air fundraising efforts
- Less on-air fundraising, more off-air

Question 2. Think over the long-term, five years out or more. If you could change one thing, at your own organization or elsewhere, to grow the audience for public radio, what would that be?

These verbatim responses are from summaries of small group discussions.

PROGRAMMING

- More high-quality local content
- Strengthen midday content
- Expand local news coverage
- Be more local
- Create more original content
- Involve more production, create a workshop for younger producers/students
- Focus on college-educated listeners
- NPR and APM alternative service
- Systemwide audit of pubradio core values (make sure national program values match with communities we are trying to reach)

DIVERSITY AND INCLUSIVENESS

PERSONNEL

- Provide a space for new voices and experiences
- Diversify staff
- Staffing that reflects the community
- Increase involvement of young people and recruit them from targeted communities
- Diversify staff to better reflect our community and incorporate new perspectives on life
- Younger staff, persons of color
- Get youth more involved early and see how that plays out

PROGRAMMING

- Diverse programming
- Develop new services to appeal to new audiences
- Incorporate the ideas, issues, and sensibilities of underserved communities into local programming
- Develop greater awareness of cultural barriers
- More outreach to minority communities

MARKETING AND PROMOTION

- Institutional marketing and deeper research on potential users as defined by our mission and core values
- Big PR campaign, redesign our identity
- Cross promote across platforms
- Market outside the station
- Public awareness campaign aimed at new listeners
- Marketing that can support efforts toward attracting new, young, and ethnically diverse listeners
- Re-brand public radio
- Broader marketing and promotion
- Improve marketing
- Promote public radio along multiple platforms
- Invest in off air marketing

ORGANIZATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

- Acquire second FM
- Redesign public radio - create a tool for education and entertainment with high standards
- Hire a PD at NPR with the power to act
- Build talent pool
- More understanding and collaboration among regional stations
- Better networking and sharing
- Large community advisory board (for donor and board development)
- Think outside the box
- Reorganize staff to meet new media demands
- Create and understand strategic plans
- Find distribution models to increase exposure and relevance (partners)
- Create media partnerships and work together on large projects

COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS, ENGAGEMENT, SOCIAL NETWORKING

- Become more of a community presence
- Engage your audience in what they think are the important issues and concerns that we should be talking about, reporting on and discussing
- A station that reflects the community, represents them, matters to them
- Dive deeper into community engagement and let listeners in

FUNDRAISING

- Overhaul fundraising
- Develop deeper and broader funding sources to minimize on-air fundraising

ONLINE SERVICE

- More experimentation online

Question 3. What larger projects or initiatives would you like to see to grow the audience? More effort on something already underway? Something entirely new?

These verbatim responses come from the individual participants. Several of the small groups did not complete a summary of this question.

PROGRAMMING

NATIONAL PROGRAMMING EFFORTS

- Create one or two successful new national programs especially targeted for a weekend audience
- Projects that involve the local population like StoryCorps
- Take chances with shows and give them proper time and budget to develop (start lean)
- Think about programming rather than programs
- Develop streams of programming for targets
- Launch one major market Hispanic public radio station, Syndicate its content and study its impact
- Establish one or more Hispanic/Latino editorial "think tanks" to inform production efforts nationwide

SHARE CONTENT

- Greater coordination of content sharing from station to station, station to network, network to station
- Create avenues for stations to share content, both from each other and national producers

TRAINING

- More emphasis on training in best practices
- More training for local content producers for more consistent appeal
- More intensive version of LNI/MEGS to grow quality of local/regional news
- Expand LNI

TALENT DEVELOPMENT

- Love Talent Quest
- Continued experimentation in identifying talent and developing new programs

PUBLIC INSIGHT JOURNALISM

- Public Insight Journalism
- Build PIJ capacity nationally

- Expansion of Public Insight Journalism

OTHER PROGRAMMING IDEAS

- Doing what already appeals v specialty shows for target demos
- Improve news department and its outreach and collaborations
- Acknowledgement of the value of niche formats
- Integrate elements in the programming that represent the community
- Stimulate and encourage a national conversation around race and racism
- Core values 2.0

ORGANIZATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

- Promote a passionately entrepreneurial business sensibility
- Attack the copyright barriers that keep music stations from using websites and the internet for program distribution as in archive listening and podcasting
- Transcription service for public radio to enable affordable online tests
- Training in broadcast management and journalism
- Management training for the more experienced
- Expand CPB funded training opportunities
- Training in new metrics
- Technical support for Sound Exchange play list requirements
- Get people involved
- Sample more smaller stations to get a real sense of the whole picture instead of focusing solely on the big market stations
- Whatever it is, please don't make it just about boards, big stations, networks. Let the system know and communicate with info and guidance on what can be done

- How about fewer initiatives and more focus on just a few big ones
- Creating public listening arenas
- Establish an initiative clearinghouse
- More youth radio partnerships with organizations across the country
- College scholarships

AUDIENCE RESEARCH

- User research
- Continuous update of web intelligence
- Deeper audience research for our individual markets, allowing all stations to conduct research with our own listeners
- Understanding of who isn't tuning in, why, and if it is realistic to go after them
- Lots more information and research on reaching underserved, minority, and younger audiences
- Actual research looking at the cultural barriers that may keep diverse audiences from coming to public radio and using it
- Continually funding and conducting audience research - perceptual and focus - so we can better reflect their wishes and desires
- Ongoing listener focus groups among all demos to constantly check the temperature on what we do
- Perceptual studies of listeners we are trying to reach. What do they think about us? What are the barriers?
- Research and marketing
- Consider systemwide music research - not in dribs and drabs - with aim of getting larger understanding of how our listeners hear music and how they mix it
- Research to address what underserved groups want that we are not doing and provide guidance on how to implement
- Continue audience research for local efforts

MARKETING AND PROMOTION

- Better public awareness. Many people would listen if they heard the programs but they instead have limited exposure
- Have we considered a national marketing effort? My Source is excellent, but it really speaks to current listeners
- National marketing campaign
- National brand marketing for public radio
- Promotion more in line with other media
- National marketing campaign
- Systemwide promotion of Morning Edition and All Things Considered for co-branding with stations
- National coordinated marketing campaign
- Brand HD
- Need for greater marketing and awareness of our product and services - locally, regionally, and nationally.

COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS, ENGAGEMENT, SOCIAL NETWORKING

- Discuss whether we as an industry should commit to a cause. To wit, access to higher education. It would be a big outreach campaign
- Better ways and tools to engage our community
- Better understand the particular cultures of our Latino communities
- Grassroots efforts to engage new listeners
- Get people more involved, make them feel included
- Invite and facilitate greater listener participation
- Active audience participation
- Greater corporate partnerships

DELIVERY CAPACITY

- More platforms (sticks and streams) for more formats
- Build out HD channels
- Create bandwidth unique to public broadcasting
- New channels for multiple formats in every major market
- Open new opportunities for acquiring frequencies so that public radio organizations can expand services
- Major investments in signal expansion
- More stations
- More frequencies and bandwidth

ONLINE SERVICE

- Aggregated website to showcase contributions of local stations
- Develop better web services and online streams

DIVERSITY AND INCLUSIVENESS

- A national outreach session on diversity
- Distribute the hiring template from WNYC's The Takeaway

FUNDRAISING

- Create partnerships to seek out and tap into unexpected funding opportunities
- Focused effort to provide more resources - money - to individual stations for new media