

We Need a Public Radio Renaissance

By Loretta Rucker

We have an emerging crisis in public radio. As stewards of the industry we can gather all of our forces to brace and protect it through self-imposed goals – or not, and watch it buckle in slow motion. The audience that public radio has cultivated for the past forty years is graying and is overwhelmingly white, and we have not invested sufficient resources in reaching out to America's growing browner and younger audiences. Our roots are shrinking and we have not cultivated new growth. It's time for a renaissance.

The system has remained risk-averse to its detriment, and now we literally have to retrace our path, re-establish who we are in the market, remake ourselves and our service, and re-introduce ourselves to our communities. Too many savvy listeners that should be low-hanging fruit for public radio have gotten the message that public radio is not for them, and in fact is uninviting. The major public radio news programs are turning potential new listeners away, and it creates an undertow effect on even the few new, smaller programs created to attract new audiences.

We need a fresh start, and we need to invest *considerable* resources to make it happen.

The public radio format that we have today took the industry a long way for a long time. But somewhere along that path, when we should have revised the format, we did not; we played it safe. Now we have to breathe bold new life into a format that is currently outworn and outdated, so that we can experience a burst of new growth. Again, this is going to require major investment.

It is not that we don't know what a lot of the barriers are for attracting new audiences; it is that we have not invested in creating the solutions. For example there is more than enough test data collected in public radio indicating what the barriers are to African-American educated information seekers. First and foremost is the issue of presentation. While African-Americans find the content of the mainstay public radio programs highly informative, educational, with great stories, they cannot overcome the presentation that they describe as "monotone," "low energy," "tired sounding," "zombie-like," "boring," "needs umph," "like listening to books on tape," etc.

Second, even those educated African-American opinion-leaders who listen to public radio's primary news programs feel that there are not enough stories and voices that reflect their communities in the mix. And third, there is the issue of perspective. People of color in general make a distinction between a generic host or guest (who may or may not be of color) and those with the express purpose of expressing the perspectives of their communities. Both are appreciated, but the distinction is clear. And while these specific notes are from African-Americans, there is no doubt information available on how other ethnic groups that could be listeners react to mainstay public radio programs.

There is a new, energetic and exciting sensibility in the air among those generations that have come after those of us who created public radio. There is an *expectation* of multi-ethnicity, a global melding of popular culture that creates a smart, cross-cultural literacy, a sense of immediate interactivity and digital acuity. Given the barriers mentioned earlier related to tone, story selection and lack of diverse voices and perspectives, isn't the creative application of programming that takes all of these factors into account a mega-hit waiting to happen? Or at the very least the panacea to the impression that public radio excludes too many groups of people?

Programs like "The Tavis Smiley Show," "News & Notes," "Tell Me More," and "The Take Away" have all been created in good faith to attract new audiences. But their job is harder than it should be because the overwhelming impression that these audiences have of public radio is that it is not for them. We have to make the entire public radio brand more inclusive so that mainstay public radio programming can even begin to migrate to stations created to serve audiences of color. It would probably be healthier for the industry if the lines of demarcation were a little more smudged.

We need large amounts of venture capital to create new programming formats and enough research money to test them. This requires our national organizations to provide leadership and resources. It also requires stations to step up and take risks already vetted at the national level.

At the same time, stations can and should also be supported in ways to engage a broader, more diverse group of constituents in their communities on the ground, in addition to serving them through their broadcasts. We can be careful and thoughtful and deliberate. We can test vigorously and roll out deliberately. But we should be equally determined that change must happen.

And then there is the “M” word... Marketing, or as we feel about it in public radio “a 4 (x 2) letter word”. Our failure to take on marketing as a part of doing business in a new era has allowed others to paint and define us into a box that we have been complicit in creating. Now we have no choice but to define ourselves if we want to claim more market territory.

We have, or have access to the talent to create models that reshape the public radio programming landscape and push the envelope in terms of broadening appeal. And while the focus of these thoughts is programming, we must at least touch on the fact that public radio’s scarce diversity at the executive leadership level has added to our dilemma. Suffice to say that all of the station managers of color and leaders of organizations of color in public radio verbalize – repeatedly – their desire to work with their general audience colleagues to broaden the reach of public radio. And, sadly, state nearly as often their frustration and disappointment that it is not happening enough.

We can begin again.

We can reverse ourselves and make the turn we should have made and can still make in order to remain viable. We can arouse energy and spirit in and for our industry. We can create new partnerships. We can create new program sensibilities that don’t force us to hand over smart, younger, browner audiences to other parts of the broadcast industry – nor turn away the majority of the audience we currently have.

Everything in life must morph and change and that which does not risks irrelevance or extinction. The dilemma public radio finds itself in today is absolutely solvable.

We must invest in a renaissance of public radio that redefines its service and target audience – and then we must change the hearts and minds of those who have counted us out.

We can begin now.

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