

We gotta be great!

By Margaret Low Smith

Vice President for Programming
National Public Radio

My father was a theoretical physicist. He used to tell me as I battled with my math homework in high school, “figuring out the answer is never hard once you have the right equation.” Somehow his words resonate as we search for the perfect algorithm that will deliver more people to public radio.

I’m surrounded by brilliant colleagues poring over 21st century tea leaves of audience research and demographic data – trying to discover that algorithm. They’re examining the matrix of new platforms, new audiences, new ways to measure success and lots of other variables to answer the question: How do we become essential in the lives of more Americans? As we look for the answer, there is one element of the equation that I know for certain is vital and not easy to quantify.

It is this. Whatever we produce, and for whatever medium, it needs to be great. No, better than great. It needs to be extraordinary. In a world with so many media alternatives, the chance to capture people’s attention and to gain their loyalty is fleeting and fragile.

We need to distinguish ourselves at every turn.

We must provide up-to-the-minute news, we must break news and tell stories that people can’t hear anywhere else. We must be enterprising and investigative. We must be imaginative and original. We must fuss over every word we choose, every guest we book, every program we put on the air.

We must tell stunning stories that make people laugh and cry and nod their heads and expand their minds. Stories that lead to driveway moments and parking lot moments and pull over to the side of the road moments. We must understand what it means to create *Harddrive-way moments!* (Oh how I wish I had coined that term, but credit goes to my pal Linton Weeks in NPR Digital!) We must provide experiences that make us miss Metro stops, make us forget the teapot is whistling and make our ever expanding audience want to come back again and again. We must make people's lives feel richer because we are there for them.

Finally, if we want to grow audience, we must do so the same way you grow *any* cherished relationship in your life. Pay close attention to it. And nurture it. Don't take it for granted.

So how do we do that? I will offer a few ideas, some rules of the road if you will. It is FAR from a comprehensive list, just some basic ingredients. My mentors, friends and colleagues have written much more extensively on all these things. Jonathan Kern, the former Executive Producer of both NPR's training unit and All Things Considered, wrote a book called *Sound Reporting* which I recommend to everyone. And the legendary Jay Kernis, NPR's former Senior Vice President for Programming, wrote brilliantly on all these issues. I keep his papers like a bible on my desk and would be delighted to share with anyone who asks.

But here is my brief list.

Stories

This is the essence of what we provide to our audience.

- Reporting, actually finding things out, is at the core of all good stories.
- Good stories are exciting to talk about. If you're not dying to tell anyone about your story, chances are it's a bit lackluster.
- Good stories have strong architecture, a natural narrative and potentially cinematic quality.
- Good stories make us interested in something we may not have known or cared about.
- Good stories break new ground, explain something complicated, reveal something important or fascinating or capture something true.
- Good stories have strong characters.

Booking

We put ourselves in peril if we book a boring guest or let a conversation go on too long.

- Always ask yourself, WHY will the audience want to spend time with this person?
- If you are talking to a potential guest and feel totally engaged in the conversation chances are the audience will too.

- If someone has an ability to explain things simply and clearly, that is a good sign.
- If you have to *convince* yourself that someone will be good on the radio, they won't be.
- If you can't think of three questions you REALLY want to know the answer to, don't book the guest.
- Ask yourself, what will make this conversation distinct from all other conversations and interesting to the audience?
- A good guest, like a good story, is like a brief, transient gift.

Writing

We must recognize the power of language and understand that an elegantly written sentence, filled with simple but rich detail – that leads perfectly into a piece of tape* – can be transformational, and that people talking and feeling out loud on the radio has a raw power that is unique to our medium.

(*I know we don't use tape anymore... but you get the idea!)

- Less is often more.
- Read your copy out loud to yourself. If it's not easy to read, fix it. It must flow off your tongue with ease.
- Good writing has rhythm and pacing. Sentences do not all follow the same form or structure.
- Good writing is conversational. Ask yourself when you write a piece of copy, "Would anyone ever actually say that?"
- If a piece of copy is confusing to you, it will also be confusing to the audience. Read it out loud to someone else and ask, "Does this make sense?"
- Challenge your own word choice. If you find yourself using words that you know are overused and tired and have lost some meaning, find another word.
- If something makes your eyes glaze over, don't put it on the air.

Sound and Tape

We talk a lot about the extremely intimate nature of radio, the power of the medium. We've said it so often and for so long that it is practically a cliché. Nonetheless, it remains real and ripe and resilient AND it is our competitive advantage. No one else can claim it.

- Great tape is memorable. You know it when you hear it. You find yourself telling people about it.
- Trust your instincts. If something truly grabs you, it will likely grab others.
- If a piece of tape is full of facts and feels obligatory, it is likely better said in copy, if at all.
- Great tape should capture the essence of an idea; not the nuts and bolts of a story.
- Don't forget that at our core we are an aural medium. Please take me somewhere. Let me hear the machine roar or the waves crash.
- When something actually happens on tape, when there is real action and you actually HEAR a story unfold on the air, that can be very exciting to listen to.

Personality

We can't drone or be derivative. We can't be, as NPR Special Correspondent Susan Stamberg calls it "the big gray wash." We need people with vibrant personalities on the air, who are like virtuosos in an orchestra, who can play solo and command our attention and make us long for more.

- There is a famous quote from the movie Jerry Maguire. It's Renee Zellweger's line to Tom Cruise. She tells him, "You had me at hello." Real talent grabs you at hello. You know it when you hear it.
- On-air performance matters. Don't kid yourself. If someone's presence makes you sleepy or you have to convince yourself to listen to a piece, the audience will feel the same way.
- We all know there is a certain public radio sound and people who SOUND like they could be on our air. Then there are people who just pop. People who are so vibrant and delightful you think you want to be their friend or have dinner with them. That is a good sign. Don't ignore it.
- Great personality never sounds forced or fakey.

Reporting, editing, and producing.

Oh yes, the craft. This alone could fill a book, and has. But I will just say this. Our reporters, editors and producers are what distinguish us. The layers of the editorial process, the "high touch" factor of what we do, is critical to our success. You can't fake it. In fact, from my perspective, reporting, editing and producing

must all be part of the package. A good producer is a good editor and a good reporter and vice versa. Everyone must be a “triple threat.”

- We must invest in those who understand the craft. We must do that on the national level and the local level. We must continue to teach the craft.
- It matters if someone has deep subject knowledge, great sources and reporting talent. Good reporting takes skill and experience. We must recognize this and help develop this muscle on every level.
- Good editing has the capacity to take a story from good to great.
- There is an art to editing tape, and mixing sound, and knowing how to hit a perfect musical post. We must keep perfecting those skills.
- We must keep the bar high and never ever settle.

Perhaps Doug Berman, the Executive Producer and creator of both Car Talk and Wait Wait... Don't Tell Me! summed it up best, “We too often ignore our own most basic instincts when it comes to programming. We need the stuff that makes US sit up and listen. Too often, we kind of talk ourselves into putting on stuff that's OK, but not great. And if we were honest, we say, yeah, it's OK, but not great. We ain't going nowhere with OK, but not great.”

I love the simplicity and the clarity of that. Maybe the final equation is simple too. Like Albert Einstein's most famous formula: $E=MC^2$. But instead of E standing for energy, perhaps in our equation, E could represent extraordinary. The M is for meaning and the C is for connection. Extraordinary equals meaning multiplied by connection. And the fact that connection is squared – multiplied times itself – well, that is the audience growth part.... WE HOPE!

As Albert Einstein once said, "most of the fundamental ideas of science are essentially simple and may, as a rule, be expressed in a language comprehensible to everyone."

My physicist father would have loved to see our worlds collide in such a lovely way and he'd have been pleased that I understand the concept of a critical constant in an equation. I'm just glad I don't have to do math anymore.

Margaret Low Smith joined NPR in 1982 as a production assistant on Morning Edition. After a brief stint in television, she spent ten years as a producer on All Things Considered. As Vice President for Programming she now leads the business and editorial relationship with NPR's acquired programs, everything from Car Talk to Fresh Air. She also oversees Wait Wait... Don't Tell Me!, NPR's channels on Sirius/XM, and NPR's international services. She has recently taken on a more strategic role with responsibility for NPR's Audience Insight and Research and for on-air fundraising and promotion.