

Polishing the crystal ball: Using research to predict the future



With the media landscape changing a little more quickly and uncomfortably than most broadcasters would like, there may never be a more important time to be working with a research roadmap. Not just for the next ratings period, but for a future when the distribution advantage that broadcast radio currently enjoys is likely to fade to black.

Broadcasters need to address two priority issues as they move forward. First, what role will broadcast radio continue to play for consumers as they are granted easier and easier access to an increasingly broad range of audio alternatives? Second, which radio brands can best be shifted to the platforms where listeners will be spending more and more of their time, and how can that best be done?

Research can help broadcasters prepare for this future, but this is a new kind of mission that will require new kinds of research approaches.

Generally, research works best when it asks people about their recent behaviour (or, even more accurately, when it observes actual behaviour through metered listening such as PPM). You can also ask

people why they behaved as they did, and if you ask your questions carefully and interpret their answers wisely—that is, if you don't expect them to comment on behaviour they might not even understand themselves—you can get a better handle on how they might act in the near future. All of this works well for most of the day-to-day, book-to-book, tactical research that radio stations typically conduct—perceptual studies, format searches, focus groups, music tests and so on.

But conventional research doesn't work as well when you ask people what they will do in the more distant future. How can you expect them to tell you how they will act in a future that will be very different from their present? By the time their future arrives, they may have new kids, new jobs, even new spouses. Each of these events, and countless others, will have an impact on their future behaviour. Not to mention how difficult it is for them to predict their behaviour with technologies they may never have used.

It's time for some unconventional thinking on some new ways to research audiences.

One way to catch a glimpse of the future is to talk to consumers who are already living it. What role does broadcast radio still play among heavy users of iPods and mp3s? How do people who routinely listen to Internet radio or stream music on demand from their iPhone, use broadcast radio? Or those who regularly download and listen to podcasts? Or live on Facebook or Twitter, or browse the My Space pages of their favourite artists? How does all of this vary by demographic and format preference?

Or you can move the conversation to a panel of more ordinary listeners and track their usage of, and attitudes towards, broadcast radio over time as you encour-

age them to experiment with new media alternatives. This is a more challenging assignment in that it goes beyond the traditional snapshot research survey and into more of a motion picture of changing habits. But it is also likely to paint a clearer picture of the future among the majority of consumers who are not among the vanguard of early adopters.

All of this begs the question of who will foot the bill for this kind of research, especially with budgets as tightly squeezed as they are today. Projects of this scale and scope lie beyond the reach of most individual stations and many of the smaller broadcast chains. They would have to act together to get the full benefit.

If there is any great upside to consolidation, it's that large broadcast chains should have the resources to pay for research like this. They also have a greater ability to act on the results, thanks to the number of chess pieces they can move to put the research insights to their strategic advantage.

Can research predict the future? Not exactly. But one thing is certain. Broadcasters who take steps to learn what tomorrow's consumers will want and need from their brands will be one step ahead of those who simply let it happen or cling to their existing business models oblivious to the fact that the consumer may have already moved on.

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