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The Winning Format Of The Future



The next big radio format will not be a format at all. We're past the era of a hot new format being replicated across the land. The next new "format" will be based on 360-degree brand development. The brand won't be Nike or Coke, it'll be your call letters.

The idea is an all-encompassing mission that goes far deeper than the "test the library, get a morning show, and pull the trigger" approach. It's not necessarily more expensive, but it's a critical M.O. to prevail and cut through the intense competition of audio's new Wild West. What it will take is mind power, fearlessness, and actually doing it.

The programming model today is based on a circa 1980 (and before) playbook. This ain't 1980 anymore. We're in a transformational era – culturally, socially, and technologically, and for any medium to be locked into decades-old thinking is terminal at a time when the future will be ruled by those riding the new wave of innovation. Radio brands need to get back to the business of creating fans – and it's not going to happen without incredible levels of intellectual muscle.

In a comprehensive radio renaissance, several components need to be brutally addressed:

Architecture: The relevance of the format is waning. Dramatic new blueprints need to be designed. If it's Top 40, maybe it's an interactive station where a playlist of 20 is repeated over and over, but each 20-song cycle is determined strictly by texts. Completely democratic. A song could go viral – or a tired song could go from 1 to 18 in a few hours. It opens up playlists to the world.

On the upper end, maybe it's a well-curated eclectic approach, not unlike a

musical NPR, or one of the deep Oldies channels emerging in Chicago and Phoenix. The point is not tweaking, but blowing it up and generating exciting and original new designs.

Sonics: Kill the sonic autopilot and create an audio identity. Amazing that stations still use *Star Wars* swooshes and filtered "man in a box" voices. How about a unique theater-of-the-mind sound that listeners will know a mile away? Radio is the least inventive audio medium out there. Sad. Invest in a sound designer – and not necessarily a radio lifer who slaps together tired imaging. Same for voices. The big ballsy voice era is cooked. There's a universe of accents and styles that can be unleashed that scream the new brand.

Personality: Some formats require very little, if amazing production carries the weight. Others will require a personality component that oozes the brand, as generic card readers pollute the air. If there are personalities, they need to be guides to the listening experience.

Artist engagement: Reclaim core artists and emerging artists. Become proactive, with managers more so than labels. Work with management to support tours and new releases. Become part of the artists' blueprint rather than just some radio station. Celebrate the artists. Bring them into your universe as agents, not utilities.

Visual identity: We live in a visual world. Drive down an expressway and notice the station graphics. Tired and similar – and usually generic. A station's visual identity should be as stunning as any culture-bending consumer product. Indie artists can be far more effective than agency graphics.

Franchises: Like a network has a new fall season with new shows, radio can create the same excitement and energy

with new features. There's more to life than the 50-year-old block party weekends. Imagine a new generation of features in the brands' mix. Short, medium, and epic.

The team: A vision isn't a democracy. There needs to be a leader who inspires and guides the team; otherwise you risk creative by committee, which will water down the vision. But with an engaged team that's in sync with the vision, magical things can happen. Brutally organized creative chaos. Once the vision is installed and instilled, the team will contribute mightily – all in harmony.

Digital: I'll keep this simple. The first priority is the radio station. If it's firing on all cylinders, then pull the trigger on digital presence – big time. But if the station itself isn't hot, all the digital efforts won't matter. It's like a song. A bad song won't be better if it's presented digitally. The song will still suck. As this article focuses on future formats, digital excellence can't be discussed in any detail, but suffice to say that if the format and station are hot, you'll be in position to capitalize on the power of digital resources. Until then, get the station right.

The overall point is that there will not be a hot new format that can be plugged in across the land, but a new style of creation, execution, and management that can spawn some strikingly new, comprehensive, and 360-degree operations. A few of those happen and succeed, and you'll see a radio renaissance, and that renaissance in thinking will generate a lot of new formats that are more than that – they're *brands*.

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