

The Clichés Of PPM

- *Entry by Sean Ross*
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The clichés of PPM took hold almost instantly. When the meter became ratings currency in Philadelphia, programmers were all but handed a "must" list:

- * *You must limit the number of times the jocks crack the mic;*
- * *You must clamp down on the length of the jock breaks - 44-year-old programming wisdom that somehow was treated as a new revelation;*
- * *You must reduce the length of your sweepers - preferably to four seconds or less;*
- * *You must boost your listening occasions by constantly setting appointments with listeners, as well as trying to extend this visit through constant teasers;*
- * *You must return to two commercial breaks an hour - thus overturning another recent industry-wide dictate for shorter stopsets, even if you had to run three commercial breaks an hour instead of two;*

There wasn't complete agreement. Some PDs felt that exact contest times were the best appointment-setter. Others said that would encourage contest players to listen less. And if Urban AC's travails were somehow connected to having a talk show in afternoons, as many did, why did Alternative KROQ Los Angeles add an hour of its morning show highlights to afternoons?

Those contradictions didn't stop programmers and consultants from being didactic, though. To go from panel to panel at NAB/R&R last fall was to hear the same advice repeated endlessly. And living between two metered markets -- New York and Philly -- the fall book felt like the PPM Programming Manual come to life. That particularly went for appointment listening - a morning show promo now had to plug four features with exact times as if a listener would really enter "7:10 - Joke of the Day" in their Blackberry.

Some programmers embraced their new "to do" list with alacrity. Those NAB panels often seemed to contain the subtext, "Isn't it great that we can now stop wasting our listeners' time by trying to engage with them?" For others, it seemed more like an attempt to cover oneself. You could hear veteran jocks reeling off their appointment times with obvious determination not to be the next Steve Dahl - Chicago's high-profile morning host who no longer fit on music-intensive WJMK (Jack-FM).

But does compliance with the clichés of PPM work? Last summer, I began trying to discern a PPM-compliance difference between Houston and Philadelphia's Urban stations. In Houston, Urban AC KMJQ (Majic 102.1) and KBXX (the Box) had their ups and downs, but quickly became proof that PPM was not inherently bad news for R&B radio. In Philadelphia, only Urban AC WDAS looked healthy in an already fragmented field where the other players were further diminished upon PPM's initial arrival.

Even from this handful of stations, it seemed that the new PPM rules contained as many red herrings as silver bullets. KMJQ's Kandi Eastman was doing only four breaks an hour, while WDAS' Patty Jackson was only doing two. But if that was the magic, how was AC powerhouse WBEB (B101) talking five times an hour? The Box, which did some tweaking for PPM, was doing OK with eight breaks an hour when first monitored, and six a few months later. Still more than WUSL Philly's four and rival WPHI's five. The Box did only one cold segue. B101 did none. Power 99 was doing five cold segues. Why was it thus not wildly successful?

But I wanted to extend the discussion beyond the issues that Urban radio has faced in the PPM era. So between Jan. 29 and Feb. 9, I monitored an hour of Philly's 17 major music outlets, clocking the lengths of their jock breaks, sweepers, and stopsets, and listening for stopset placement and appointment setting. All of the listening took place between 9a-4p, excluding the Noon hour or any 9 a.m. hours where the morning team was still on.

Caveats abound. It's hard to come up with a perfectly representative hour for any station. By necessity, listening was spread throughout the week--meaning that some Mondays (once known for lower spotloads) were included. I also heard some Top 40 and R&B stations on the Monday after the Grammys (and the Chris Brown/Rihanna story), meaning that some of the breaks were perhaps longer than usual. I also did my listening on-line, which means that I did not have the exact experience an over-the-air listener did.

The most recent available Arbitron reports for Philly at this writing is the December monthly, the Christmas special report and three January weeklies which end pretty much about when our monitoring starts. We'll revisit our findings in a few weeks when more current data is available, but suffice it to say that we hear these stations on a regular enough basis to feel that we heard typical programming. And most Philly stations have managed to pull off at least a few good weeklies or monthlies since PPM began. So do you judge the low-key WFFF on its sensational early numbers? Subsequent valleys? The station's rebound in the last weekly? The presentation has been tight throughout.

You won't find a brief in what follows for unlimited jock talk or 20 minutes of commercials an hour - tightly programmed stations are still good radio stations, and Philly radio is definitely tighter than it was a year ago. But you will see a lot of exceptions to every rule, as well as stations whose eagerness to comply with one PPM rule is probably tripping them up on another. It furthered my sense that the Clichés of PPM were distracting stations from dealing with their real issues.

For starters, B101, tied for second in the market in the most recent weekly, is indeed a station that most programmers would consider well-programmed for PPM. Its sweepers are three to 10-seconds long (including the pre-recorded music backsell that precedes them). It has no long-form promos. Its two spot breaks this hour totaled nine minutes. It also did at least three teasers in the hour I heard--to the Saturday night '80s show and twice to the next five in a row. That said, B101 had five jock breaks, none less than 20 seconds and some as long as 39 seconds. And it does no cold segues. B101 is tight; it's not minimalist.

Now consider B101's new rival, WNUW (Now 97.5). It's jockless in middays, and its spotload was only seven minutes in the hour monitored. Now 97.5 posted impressive numbers with Christmas music in the fall; it's also doing better than it was a year ago as Smooth Jazz WJJZ. But it's still tied for 13th in the market 12-plus in the most recent weekly. Does B101 win because of greater compliance in other areas? WNUW has some longer promos and, with no jock in middays, did no appointment setting. More likely, B101 does enough other things right that they can still win even if somebody is playing even more music. WISX (My 106.1), with no talk break longer than :19, no sweeper or promo longer than :09--is tighter in some ways than both stations. It was also tied for 13th.

The same goes for heritage rocker WMMR and midday veteran Pierre Robert. In the hour I heard, Robert ran two interview segments with Ed Kowalczyk, lead singer of the band Live. Combined, one jock/interview break went 4:59, including a setup that ran 2:13 by itself. But in middays, WMMR was edging out WRFF, considered one of the industry's first PPM role models, and had more than double the numbers of WYSP, designed as a more streamlined version of WMMR with a similar, but more conservative music mix.

The No. 2 music station in Philadelphia overall is Oldies WOGL, where middayer Harvey Holiday, the market leader in last three weeklies, did some nine-second breaks over intros, but also one that ran 1:11. WOGL has some eight- and nine-second promos, but it also still runs 40-second sponsor promos and 13 minutes of spots in the hour we heard.

Then there's Gospel WPPZ (Praise 103.9)--outside the first tier but a station that has had some good numbers in recent months and is often cited as evidence that PPM can be kind to a low-cume/high-TSL niche format. On its "Random Acts of Kindness Tuesday," Praise was offering the sort of foreground personality and heavy phones that have been less common in middays in the PPM era. There were listener calls throughout the hour and jock breaks that took between :38 and 1:01. There were also minute-long promos to kick off each of the station's two stopsets.

I've thought in the past that the PPM "rules" might take hold to the extent that once every station was totally compliant, they would lose their perceived effectiveness and stations would have to find some other way to win. But it's hard for any station to "comply" with PPM dogma in every way, or, for that matter, to entirely flout it. WISX for all its relative

austerity had three stopsets totaling 15 minutes in the hour heard. Conversely, WMMR's Robert, despite his longer breaks, got in five teasers that hour. And doing fewer jock breaks an hour often led to longer breaks when stations did stop down because jocks had so much station business to execute, much of it sponsor-driven.

For example, WDAS' two breaks were 1:31 and 1:15. The former contained the calls, a positioner that promoted mornings, afternoons, and nights; a backsell of the previous song; the jock's hello/introduction, and a plug for an upcoming Walt Disney World remote broadcast that was tied in to both a qualifying ticket giveaway for a separate event and a grand prize Disney trip in conjunction with a sponsor. Then came the cue to call in and win. By contrast, WOGL did eight breaks (including a longer bit going into a stopset) but at least half were over a song's intro.

So how then does PPM's "must list" stack up against the actual practices of successful stations?

** Number of jock breaks: As already noted here, the winners range from two (WDAS) to eight (WOGL). And the stations in the second tier contain some of the stations with the fewest jock breaks - WYSP with three and jockless WNUW;*

** Length of jock breaks: B101 was moderate. WOGL had shorter breaks over intros and longer breaks at stopsets. WDAS had only long breaks at stopsets. WMMR had long breaks and interviews throughout the hour. Classic Rock WMGK was relatively even-handed: moderate breaks at the stops and shorter jock-plus-production interludes in sweeps. WRFF, with its greater brevity, was fifth in the most recent weeklies, but similarly paced WBEN and WISX were midpack.*

** Sweeper length: Between the songs, stations have gone uniformly shorter, with some (WBEN, WISX, WRDW, WRFF, WIOQ) coming in at two seconds or less. B101 is consistently short. WOGL does just fine with eight seconds--now the longer end of the spectrum. WPPZ was at :13. More important may be whether a station still kicks off stopsets with a longer promo. B101 and WDAS do not, while two low-rated stations were running a :90 second promo before the stop.*

** Appointment listening: I heard a lot of "coming up next" teasers, but very little of the "at 7:20, 9:20, and 11:45 tomorrow morning" crossplugs that were epidemic in the fall. In the first tier of stations, WMMR had the aforementioned five plugs. But it was the three Hip-Hop stations slugging it out in the low three-share range - WRDW, WUSL, and WPHI - that were doing the most teasers. WPHI in particular was promoting that it would play its money song at the end of that hour's nine-in-a-row, meaning that there were eight teasers that hour.*

** Two stopsets an hour: The only holdouts as heard here were No. 6 WMMR, No.9 WXTU, and No. 13 WISX. (WMMR and WISX were both heard in hours adjacent to Noon, so that third stopset might have been atypical, meant to allow more music in a special programming hour.) B101 is known to run three stopsets in some hours.*

** Stopset length: B101 had nine minutes of spots (mostly covered here by Web-only songs), but WOGL had a more typical 13. The fewest minutes of commercials in their hour were on WNUW (seven), WYSP (nine), WRDW (eight), WUSL (eight), WRFF (eight plus a Clear Channel "blink"), and WPHI (one six minute stop in this hour). So, again, there were lots of shorter breaks outside the top 10.*

** Cold segues - From the beginning, the PPM cliché with the least correlation to ratings - the top 10 is evenly divided between stations that do them and do not.*

With the possible exception of the "two stopsets vs. three" issue, the new mechanics of PPM programming don't override a station's other overarching issues - whether you believe those issues to be driven by measurement, programming, or spotload. If PPM has given a boost to any kind of station, it's the one fortunate enough to be alone or dominant in a format franchise - preferably one that does well in both cume and TSL. KBXX has only one weak-signalized direct competitor. Philly has a three-way Hip-Hop war of attrition. And those stations are far more "PPM compliant" than still-foreground gospel WPPZ, which has the combination of long TSL and just enough cume (with no direct competitor) for a relative niche format.

So how then did stations get so distracted? For one thing, a lot of the global issues are harder to solve. How can one of three stations in a format make their competitors go away? The resources for the sort of full-court press that might force a rival out of a format aren't available these days. The ability to cut the spotload (if the economy isn't already doing it for you) isn't always there. The ability to be sure you are in the right position and playing the right songs is increasingly diminished. Focusing on minutiae instead is like getting off a crowded freeway to take surface streets - it's probably no faster, but you at least feel like you're doing something. That doesn't mean all the details of a radio station shouldn't be as right (and tight) as possible. But it does mean that programmers shouldn't lose perspective.