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Power Player

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A former air personality and programmer himself, Steve Reynolds has become a successful morning show talent coach because he understands the human connection. Flashy contests, outrageous stunts and star-studded interviews may have their place on morning shows, but what Reynolds has found that it's the human connection - relatability and likeability - that separates the great from the not-so-great. Here he explains why that is...

When did you decide to go from being an air personality to being a talent coach?

I did a morning show until the mid-'90s, then programmed for several years. As consolidation started in radio, one of my mentors -- Jon Coleman of Coleman Insights - told me there was going to be a need for talent coaching of personality shows. Jon knew me well enough to know that had I not gone into radio, I'd have become a schoolteacher. He said, "You like to teach; you understand morning show strategy; you've done it and you've managed it as a PD..." That's how I started the company in 1999, which teaches morning shows ways to be better and more successful.

How have the keys to a successful morning show changed from the time you started on-air to now?

It's not that they have necessarily changed, but the competitive terrain has. There's much less margin for error because of the number of choices people have today for morning entertainment

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and information. Not only Internet radio and smartphones, but also Facebook and social media, and one thing hardly anyone talks about - how good morning TV is. We did some research for a show I work with and asked listeners when they wake up, what did they turn on first - TV, radio, or neither? We found that the number of people who turn on the TV has grown tremendously. Our objective became to either figure out how to get them back, or get more in-car listening to generate the same quarter-hour shares.

The competitive terrain is much fiercer, so we need to be a lot better at what we do -- and we have to do it quicker because of choice. Listeners (consumers) won't tolerate something that doesn't work for them for long.

What actions can you take to get TV morning show viewers back into radio?

I am not sure you can. Most local TV newscasts start at 4:30 or 5:00 because there is an available audience. They're filling a need we either didn't or couldn't. I doubt we can recapture those images. The beauty of radio and one of the advantages we have is that we're mobile; you can get it wherever you are, and it's a very intimate medium. The people on your morning show have to get engaged and relate to the audience, they must connect with them around the right topics and entertain them - and I teach them how to do that better to maximize the available audience.

Listeners choose us to laugh. People gravitate to where the fun is. They choose morning radio to have a good time on their way to work. With every show I coach, we have weekly conversations about what to share from the talents' lives, how to tell stories, how to be honest with the audience, what the right topics are, all in a way that engages and entertains listeners so they keep coming back for more.

Do you counsel your morning talent to consciously compete against voicetracked or syndicated rivals, or should they focus solely on their own show?

The morning shows I work with compete against everyone. Voicetracked and syndicated morning shows have strengths and weaknesses as well. We talk about the competitive terrain because that's part of having a strategy. But we need to understand what is iconic and unique about our morning show brand and our people, and communicate that through the topics we choose and, more importantly, what we do with those topics.

We talk a lot about content strategies and morning show plots. TV gets the concept of plots more than radio does. It's the first thing we figure out when I start working with a program. Our content plot becomes central to what we do. This strategy guides every decision we make to stand out and separate ourselves from the content plots of other shows we might compete with directly. Every TV show has a unique content plot. There's only one "Sex In The City," only one "Seinfeld," only one "Cheers," and only one "Big Bang Theory." It's not that no one has tried to replicate their content, but every time someone has tried to steal their plot, they've never succeeded. We have to understand that in radio and it's a conversation we don't have enough.

Could you give us an example of a morning show you consulted that has unique content and a plot?

Every show I work with has a plot and it's what guides their success. One example is Karlson & McKenzie at WZLX/Boston. They were already established when I started working with them but got even better when we figured out their content plot. The first thing we did was look at their competitors. There was Imus, which is essentially "grumpy old white-guy politics." Of course Imus does a lot more than that, but that's the driving nature of his program's sense of humor. Does that mean Karlson & McKenzie can't do politics? Of course not, but it can't be central to what we do because Imus owns that terrain.

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There is Loren and Wally at WROR, who do a lot of parodies and bits. Again, that doesn't mean Karlson & McKenzie can't do parodies ... we just don't do too many of them. Then there's The Hill-Man Morning Show on WAAF, who does edgy sex talk.

So what did we do with Karlson & McKenzie? This goes back to the difference between TV and morning radio. TV is fake - a plot is derived, scripts are written, and actors bring it to life.

The success in radio comes from who the personalities really are. The show has to be a reflection of the people on the program and their level of authenticity, their sensibilities, their take on the world, and their sense of humor. Your brand only wins when it's authentic, and when it comes down to it, Karlson & McKenzie are essentially donut-eating regular guys, whose lives never seem to go their way, who happen to be very funny. That's the beauty of them and their show. It's them at their most authentic. Their show is about their dysfunction - and their take on dysfunction in the world around them. Once we understood the plot and focused on that, we knew what stuff to get rid of because it didn't work for them any more - it didn't fit the plot - and what to keep.

Mike Thomas, WZLX's terrific PD, came up with the positioning line for the show - the slogan, "Big, Fat, Fun Mornings." The studio webcam became the "Fat Cam." Their favorite charity became "The Big Fat Food Fund" - and they were off to the races. Strategy is everything to me. Once you understand what strategies your rivals run, you can create unique content and focus on a show plot that only you can do.

Say you're putting a new morning show together. What are the most effective ways to developing a winning chemistry among them - and how much time should you and station management give them to see if they click?

The way you develop relationships between new team members is much like how you develop your hosts' relationships with the audience and in real life. When you get to know the new team member, you find common bonds and interests. The key is to get in a position to understand what they're like and what would make you and the audience care about them.

This takes time; station management must have patience because you can't force it. If you look at any sustained relationship in your personal life, odds are there are only five to 10 people you are really close to and relate to better than most anyone else. That kind of close relationship evolves organically; the same goes for any morning show. You can't put a new team on the air and expect to hear great chemistry in one week. The audience knows if you're faking it and they penalize people who try too hard. So, you must take things in stages to properly evolve the relationship between the cast members and listeners.

The station also has got to let the morning team work at it, to let the audience spend time with them, get to know them and be inquisitive about them. Trust is earned, and getting listeners to care about these people takes time. You really can't judge a new morning show's chemistry or potential for a minimum of 18 months.

One of our biggest goals is to internally build the team. I have to understand, as do they, the components of terrific, trusting teams. If you can build in those attributes, they'll work together well and listeners will feel it. We're working on this, as well as developing great content, constantly.

Is that time frame the same whether you bring in an entirely new morning show into a market, or just adding a news anchor to a show that's already there?

If you import a new morning show to a market and you're not willing to give that show 18-24 months to take off, you're not giving them a fair shot. The audience moves very slowly; it's human nature to resist change. Odds are people get up every morning and do the same things in the same order. They take the same routes to work every day. No one likes their routine disrupted, so

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you can't expect any new morning show to be fully embraced in a short period of time. You must have a strategy to introduce a new show to foster an environment that enables it to succeed. Much like that overbearing person all of us have run into at parties or in the office, the person who goes too fast tends to get rejected quickly.

If you're talking about the introduction of a new ancillary character, such as a traffic or newscaster who provides a specific service to the program, I would suggest minimal banter at first and then develop chemistry between them and the new cast members internally. That need not take 18 months to two years, but you should expect it to take several months to get the new cast member's personality fully integrated into the team.

How important is marketing a new morning show in shortening that timeline for success?

First off, in many places, there is virtually no budget to market a new morning show - and even if there is a budget, you have to use whatever you have on attracting those most likely to listen to the new show first.

A new morning show can gain audience from three places -- and you gain share from these places in this order: 1) those already listening to the station in the mornings; you effectively invite those people to come back the next day. That takes the use of entertaining benchmarks and compelling plot narratives -- story arcs that prompt listeners to tune in one more time around relatable content. The quickest way to get ratings share is to convince audiences already inclined to listen to come back the next day. That's the first thing I help them figure out.

The second place to get audience is from station partisans who don't listen in the morning. You want them to sample the new show, and you can attract them in a number of ways -- contesting, promos, etc. If they tune in and the content is unique, entertaining, authentic and innovative, they'll become regular listeners.

The third place to get audience is by attracting other radio stations listeners, those who watch morning TV, or those who don't use radio. This is the toughest putt because it requires marketing money and/or doing the kind of content that will cause talk in the market, which isn't an image I worry about in the first phase of a new morning show.

As for listeners of other radio morning shows, I had a conversation with a prospective client who was about to put on a new morning team. They were going up against an established morning brand on another station in their market. They told me their goal was to get listeners of the legendary morning show to sample them instead. I suggested that on launch, this might not be the right strategy, considering the established show is loved. Those listeners have no relationship with his new morning host, but they have one with the guy they're listening to - why would they be interested in listening to someone else? It's far more important to figure out how get the people who are on your station and would be inclined to listen to your morning show to tune in again initially.

I don't worry about getting non-radio station people to sample the morning show for several years - at least not until we've maximized the first two categories. Once you have those first two categories of listeners hooked on your content, those people will talk about your show to their friends who aren't listening - and then you'll start to generate more new listeners organically. Once the show gets through this phase, and if the content is completely on point and the show is well evaluated by P1s and you have marketing money, then that will certainly help.

If you look at the most successful morning shows, you'll see that they really broke through at around the two-year mark ... that's when people became convinced that if they missed the show that day, they'd miss being around entertaining friends they are comfortable with.

A popular train of thought among radio management and programmers these days is that to succeed in PPM, air personalities should be extremely succinct and get back to the music as soon as possible. Do you ascribe to that notion?

Yes and no. It depends on the competitive terrain and how evolved the relationship is between your show and its audience. Ultimately this is about building your radio station brand -- and real, compelling, relatable, and fun personalities (in every daypart) play a very critical role in that; they give listeners a reason to come back again.

We should have a clock that works. An analogy I use with talent to help them understand that listeners give us precious little time to entertain them is pornography. When porn was available only on VCR, there's not a soul in the world who sat through the opening scene where the pizza delivery guy shows up, rings the doorbell, and the woman in the negligee answers. You fast-forwarded to the bedroom scene. That's what you really wanted to see and, with the fast-forward button, you were in control. With porn moving to the Internet, you have none of that. The adult movie industry knows to upload porn in three to four minute video clips to the web, understanding that that is the attention span of the average viewer.

You can manage the clock and eek out another minute or two of listening, but you won't enhance your morning show and manage your real estate in the market if "efficiency" is all you work on. It's important (especially for a newer show), but ultimately you're stamping credibility on the radio station through your people. You're making art every day, so it's not always perfect. Telling stories, sharing your life, connecting with the audience, and entertaining them is the only way to do that. It'll need to be managed, but just having the right clock and stopset placement will never take the place of real, live, entertaining personalities on a radio station to build the brand.

Of course, that doesn't mean they should have free reign. It's true that if you play music, meters peak, and when you talk, meters tend to go down -- but does that mean you shouldn't talk? No, because if done right, talk can be extremely valuable. Especially talk that isn't boring. You build engagement when the air talent has a give-and-take with the audience and builds a rewarding relationship with them that develops loyalty back to the show and station.

I'm not big fan of clock conversations. You can put stopsets wherever you want, but that's not going to grow loyalty to the personalities on the morning show. There still has to be structure and discipline. But ultimately the biggest win comes when you manage your people and the content strategy so they enhance what you're doing with the station, by giving listeners another reason to come back.

It's not hard to believe that a porn analogy would work to convey the message of what PPM has taught us all - that listeners don't want any foreplay, just get right to the #!&ing. Listeners will reward that approach.

Quick side note: I am always asked whether Howard Stern could succeed these days in terrestrial radio under PPM. The answer is an unequivocal yes. Why? Because the people who listen love him and care about him. He is desperately honest with the audience. And as history has shown, they wouldn't accept anything less.

April 1st recently passed. While some stations are still doing April Fools stunts, word has it that some station management were citing the Australian radio prank that led to a suicide as a reason not to stage them this year. What's your take on those April Fools and water-cooler stunts?

It depends on what they're doing. Some ideas can be perceived as whacky '80s-'90s radio stunts that don't work today. If it's the right idea that fits the show's strategy, it can work. In general, I'm not big fan of the gigantic stunts if they're cheesy, but some people peddle in them and do well. One or two stunts won't put you on the map, unless your day-to-day and break-to-break content is

on point. So that's the bigger conversation we have each week: How do we use real life to entertain the audience?

When you say real life, exactly how much of a personality's personal life is fair game on a morning show? Where do you draw the line?

Each talent draws the line for me. But the difference between exceptionally successful and moderately successful talent is how vulnerable they are on the air. The best relationships in life are between people who are the most vulnerable with each other, who share things and are willing to share what's under the surface. You only get close to people through vulnerability - and that's the beauty of what we do in radio. The less you share about your life, the less successful you'll be. If you can't give up yourself, why would the listener want to spend time with you? It's not that everything should be shared, but the most successful morning shows in our industry are well liked by their audience because they feel like they know them. That should be by design and not by accident.

Look at Ellen DeGeneres, as an example, who was moderately successful in the '90s. She finally came out of the closet and told us what we really knew all along, that she is gay. Look at what's happened since then; she gets a daytime TV talk show and she wins an Emmy and is immensely successful - just by being herself. Ten years running and the audience loves her. Now she's talking about her wife in the middle of the day -- and got funnier when she became honest with us.

On Good Morning America, Robin Roberts told us what disease she has and her course of treatment. Sam Champion, who does the weather for GMA, just announced he's marrying his partner. Did you ever think there'd be a day when a weatherman on a major network admitted to a national audience that he was getting married to his partner? And they're celebrating this at 8a. This is the #1 TV morning show for a reason. Good Morning America is kicking The Today Show's ass because the hosts share their lives and are honest with the audience.

The requirement for morning show personalities is to just be who they are. Yes, there's a difference between things that are personal and private. Not everything should be talked about (or is good to talk about). I respect there are private things about life that the audience shouldn't hear from a radio host. If you're sick and vomiting, there's no reason to share that, but if you have a fight with your wife who thinks you're bad in bed, tell the audience! Use your personal life to find a context with the audience.

I have two goals for every show I work with, regardless of format, at the 18-month mark of our work. If I ask listeners about the show and they say, unaided, that 1) they feel like they know the cast because they're just like them and 2) that they're fun to be around, then the show has its best shot at being successful. You've built authenticity and humor images with your audience - and you did so by having unique content and a plot. Every show I work with understands this so we choose and do content in ways that grow those images.

Finally, when it comes to a prospective morning show, what do you look for to warrant your interest in working with them ...and are you interested in taking on more talent?

When I'm around a group of people, I want to see that the cast members have the desire and confidence to learn a strategic approach to doing a radio show. I want the cast members to challenge each other and learn from each other. I love talent who like to be made uncomfortable so they grow. I want to have fun with them in the process.

Is there room for growth in my business? Absolutely. I believe in radio and, more importantly, I believe in radio talent. Compare us against all the other options, and it's our true and most viable point-of-differentiation to win. I've had the great fortune to work with some of America's biggest companies, radio's best managers and programmers, and shows, as well as been lucky enough to

travel internationally to do this work. Radio stations fare better, in both ratings and revenue, when we have interesting, fun, inquisitive, real personalities and support and coach them to learn their craft even better to win.

What's universal is that we all want to connect with other people. It's a human trait to be close to people, and we want to be around those we like more often. That's human come and TSL - and that's what makes the ratings go up around the world.

You can only do that with personalities. And that's the magic of radio that has always worked, and always will.

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