

Rob Sidney
RTVF Internship 349-0, Sec. 20
Northwestern University
December 15, 2003

The Singularity of Success: How Narrowing Focus Can Improve Ratings for AC Radio

I have in mind a plan of development which would make radio a
“household utility” in the same sense as the piano or phonograph
. . . in the form of a simple “Radio Music Box”

It’s these words, written in 1916 by David Sarnoff (then a manager of American Marconi) which set in motion the radio medium as carrier of mass-appeal content. Flash forward nearly ninety years and radio remains a business insistent on attracting the largest, most diverse audiences possible. Despite an abundance of examples to the contrary in other industries, conventional radio programming practice continues to stress the value of being “all things to all people.”

Even as television supplanted radio in the 1950s as the true national “mass medium,” and soap operas and variety hours gave way to less complex fare of recorded music and news, broadcasters still pursued the big numbers. Top-40 – the first true popular-music “format” – was designed to cut a wide demographic swath: reaching entire families in the mornings and afternoons, housewives during the midday, and teens at night. For a nation with only a few thousand radio stations – the majority of them in the largest markets – this was a viable (if somewhat ham-handed) approach for music radio’s infancy. It would wind up serving as the model for some four decades’ worth of radio broadcasting.

Positioning and Focus

Corporate America is hooked on bigness, on efficiency, on growth – reaching a larger and larger number of customers with the most generically applicable product or message possible. The typical American consumer responds best to intimacy, personalization, and simplicity – both in product and in message. It’s precisely this paradox which led advertising and marketing executives Al Ries and Jack Trout to champion the concept of “positioning” – first in a 1972 series of articles for Advertising Age, and then in their watershed book on marketing, Positioning: The Battle for your Mind, originally published in 1981. It established Ries and Trout as gurus in the advertising and marketing fields – and led to a dozen more volumes between them, all of which key off one simple precept: less is more.

Positioning (both the idea and the book) begins with a definition. “Positioning,” write Ries and Trout, “is not what you do to a product. Positioning is what you do to the mind of the prospect. That is, you position the product in the mind of the prospect” (2-3). It’s a loud, overcommunicated society in which we live; the simpler the message, the more powerful and memorable it becomes to the consumer. Most established products, they assert, already occupy some position in the consumer’s mind. Since changing someone’s mind is an exceedingly difficult task, it’s easier to work with the beliefs and perceptions that are already there (193-194).

Ries and Trout devotees in the radio industry – and there were a few on the “bleeding edge” in the 1980s – crudely adopted positioning as a way to better communicate the attributes of their stations and differentiate them from competitors. To the early initiates, “positioning” simply meant between-records liners heralding “the best mix of music” and “great songs from yesterday and today.” All in all – in hindsight – rather vague, broad, unemotional descriptors which could have been universally applied to any music format.

In their 1989 follow-up, Bottom-Up Marketing, Ries and Trout first introduce the virtue of narrowing focus – and it begins with the perception in the consumer’s mind:

Why is a narrow focus superior? In any given case, a generalist might be superior to a specialist, but the human mind thinks otherwise. Would you rather have your double-bypass operation conducted by a general practitioner or a heart surgeon? Would you rather have your Cadillac serviced by the corner gasoline station or the Cadillac dealer that sold you the car? . . . The specialist has the upper hand in the mind. The specialist can focus on one product, one benefit, one message. (62, 73)

During this same decade, the number of U.S. radio stations had passed 10,000, and competition had grown ferocious in all but the smallest markets. Operators began to more clearly differentiate their products, leading to increased fragmentation of music formats. Where in 1970 there had been perhaps a handful of radio genres – top-40, middle-of-the-road, easy listening, black and country – by the 1990s, music radio had splintered into more than a dozen subcategories, among them: contemporary hits, rhythmic hits, urban, urban adult, adult contemporary, active rock, classic rock, classic hits, oldies, alternative, “smooth jazz,” adult album alternative (“AAA”), new country and classic country.

Top-40 once stood as the true mass-appeal music format, geared to teens and young adults. Today, a station which would play the contemporary equivalents of Frank Sinatra, the Supremes, Glen Campbell and the Rolling Stones (say, Michael Bolton, Beyoncé Knowles, Toby Keith and Linkin Park) would be laughable. The format segmentations of the past twenty years seem a logical, intelligent progression for a competitive industry and a more discerning consumer base. Why, then, do the marketing messages associated with the stations in most of

these formats continue to be disturbingly similar and vague? After all these years, the positioning (an impotent application of the concept, at best) still boils down to “We play the best and most music for everybody all the time.”

In 1993, Al Ries and Jack Trout made their views more concrete, positing that there are precisely Twenty-two Immutable Laws of Marketing; among them “The Law of Focus,” which states, “The most powerful concept in marketing is owning a word in the prospect’s mind” (27). Apparently Ries took the concept to heart – abandoning his association with Trout shortly thereafter and publishing his own volume on Focus in 1996. It’s here that he demonstrates that the most successful companies are those that focus on a core product and a core message – and jettison the extraneous, energy-wasting activities. To grow, Ries maintains, an organization must contract. Focus is the key factor that can make a company number one in its market.

WLYF Miami: A Case Study in Focus

The author is the Director of Programming and Operations of Jefferson-Pilot’s WLYF (101.5 LITE FM), Miami, an adult-contemporary property with a 33-year market heritage. LITE FM is one radio station for which Focus (again, both the idea and the book) represented a turning point.

In early 1996 – more than five years after a format change from traditional instrumental easy listening – WLYF had stalled. The station was still plagued by its “elevator-music” images of the 1970s and 80s, dogged by repeated studies showing the audience believed the music “too slow” and “too old” – this despite efforts to add more current product and contemporize the presentation. While WLYF enjoyed consistent top-three Arbitron performance with total persons 12+, the bulk of that audience was over the age of 45 – leaving the station languishing

just outside the top-ten, adults 25-54. Among listeners and advertisers, WLYF bore the stigma of being “Uncle Irving and Aunt Sadie’s favorite radio station.”

Making matters more difficult was a crosstown competitor which had launched its adult contemporary presentation in 1990, within weeks of WLYF’s switch. Despite coming out of the gate at virtually the same time, Cox’s WFLC quickly gained the upper hand – owing to no prior perceptual baggage (the owners had changed call letters and flipped format from album rock), and to a well-articulated on- and off-air marketing campaign positioning “Coast 97.3” as the “anti-radio station:” no hype, no contests, no deejay chatter – just lots of music.

The WLYF management, meantime, realized they were running irreconcilably behind. A significant investment in television advertising, telemarketing and direct mail was evidently producing naught. At the urging of the station’s general manager, department heads turned to Ries’s treatise on focus, searching for a secret to success.

Ries points to “fifteen keys to a long-term focus: principles that are helpful in developing an effective long-term corporate focus.” Among them: “A focus is simple” ... “a focus is memorable” ... and “a focus is revolutionary” (*Focus*, 268-275).

In reviewing the history of WLYF, management considered those qualities that had brought the station its greatest success during its first two decades. From the earliest days, WLYF had been the choice for in-office listening, predominantly among women. Still, the station had never consciously pursued female listeners – and the workplace utility seemed to be a fortunate (though “matter-of-fact”) byproduct of the low-key music.

In one memorable, epiphanous afternoon meeting between the general manager, the promotions director and the author, the gauntlet was thrown: What if LITE FM were dedicated exclusively to reaching working women in the workplace? What if the station touted the stress-

relief benefit of the music, and billed it as an “escape” from the rigors of the workday? And – most importantly – what if this were the only marketing message the station sent, on the air and off?

Such was the beginning of LITE FM’s “focus:” a disciplined, rigorous, almost maniacal concentration on becoming the station for working women. But how to shake the traditionalists, the “inside-out” radio types within the company out of their “bigger-is-better” stupor ... and get them to buy in to the value of a narrowed, one-note approach?

Another one of Ries’s fifteen principles of focus is: “A focus is internal as much as external” (279). It’s essential that everyone involved in the creation and marketing of the product understands the core message and the target consumer. LITE FM’s management quickly realized the need to create a profile of their typical customer, their average listener. Notably, they didn’t seek the “ideal” or “quintessential” listener; rather they wanted to capture the sensibility of the majority of their audience – and match the station’s programming and marketing to them.

It began as a roundtable exercise with the station’s programming staff in the Fall of 1996, asking them to define the typical LITE FM listener. To make it more visceral, she was given the name “Lynda Martin” (though as South Florida’s Hispanic population – and the station’s own Hispanic audience – continues to grow, she could very well be christened “Lynda Martinez”).

Approximations, hunches and anecdotal observations have given way through the years to empirical data from Arbitron, Media Audit and Scarborough studies – as well as LITE FM’s own perceptual research – on Lynda’s lifestyle and consumer behavior. The staff knows Lynda’s age (42), occupation (head teller at a Bank of America branch in the Miami suburb of

Miramar), where she lives (in a \$215,000 home in Pembroke Lakes) with her husband (Chuck, a county deputy) and their two kids (Jennifer, 14, and Matt, 11) – and their dog.

Lynda's shared her free-time activities, her exercise and self-improvement routine, her television and reading preferences, the cars in her garage, the fast food she eats, and the supermarket she shops.

The Lynda Martin profile (digested in a colorfully illustrated single-page format; Appendix 1) quickly became a barometer, a litmus test for LITE FM's marketing and promotions plan, its newscasts and the content shared by its air talent. Put simply, the station asked at every opportunity, "Does this matter to Lynda Martin?" If it didn't, the idea was scrapped – or modified until it became relevant.

More than a guideline for programming and promotions, Lynda Martin has been adopted throughout the organization as shorthand for the LITE FM audience. Everyone in the building that has any association with LITE FM receives a copy of the profile. The author is impressed to hear an account executive mention she's turning down a promotional request from a client "because Lynda Martin wouldn't be interested in the prize." Or for an engineer to engage him in a discussion on the possible fatigue effects of the station's audio processing on "Lynda Martin's ears."

Ries also points out: "A focus is not instantly successful." "In the short term," Ries writes, "narrowing the focus will cost you business, you might lose sales by dropping products or services. A powerful focus is almost never effective in the short term" (288).

When LITE FM embarked on the female-centric workplace focus, it required a steely determination to stay on-target. The station abandoned television advertising, residential telemarketing and direct mail in favor of reaching Lynda at the time and place she was most

inclined to use the product. The telemarketing and direct mail now went directly to the office – along with a weekly faxed newsletter that spoke with a decidedly female “voice.” All on-air contesting was conducted between 9 a.m. and 5 p.m. ... and LITE FM’s air talent began weekly visits to a half-dozen offices selected from the station’s database, bearing gifts and donuts.

These “Stress Raids” were decidedly grass-roots affairs which – combined with the other “stealth” workplace marketing tactics – were questioned by some as not large-scale or memorable enough (not to mention ignoring other listeners in other dayparts).

The on-air positioner became “South Florida’s Number-One Listen-While-You-Work Station” and the product was branded as “Lite music, less stress.” The station image voice underwent gender reassignment, and LITE FM became one of the few major-market radio stations using a female voiceover talent. Even the listener testimonial sweepers were crafted to include only women’s voices – each of them speaking to the workplace utility and stress-reduction benefits of LITE FM.

The orientation to women grew even less subtle. The announcing staff – 80% of which were female by 2003 – were talking exclusively about topics of interest to women, from an unabashedly female point-of-view. Certainly, concerns were raised: Was LITE FM becoming too “girly-girl?” Would the station lose male listeners?

In Focus, Ries writes:

Ford Motor Company tried a safety approach for one year and then abandoned the concept. “Safety doesn’t sell” became a watchword for Detroit. Volvo, on the other hand, used exactly the same focus as Ford. The difference is, Volvo didn’t abandon the safety ship after the first year. They kept at it, for thirty years in a row. (288)

Within two years, LITE FM's audience composition tilted to 65-70% female, it became the unquestioned number-one radio station for workplace listening, and it rose to consistently finish in the top five with adults 25-54. By Summer 1999, the station ranked number two, total week, with adults (and number one with women). And the Summer 2003 Arbitron showed LITE FM posting its best performance ever: number one, adults 25-54, with a 6.9 share.

It all began with so wonderfully simple a concept, an easily-articulated benefit for a singular consumer base: Stress-free music for working women.

A Lone Voice in the Forest?

It might be easy to dismiss "focus" as the passionate, quixotic campaign of an author promoting his consultancy. Indeed, visit ries.com and you'll see Al Ries has positioned his business – today a partnership with his daughter, Laura – as "Focusing Consultants." But the concept is echoed in the philosophies of other contemporary business and media strategists.

For Jim Collins, author of Good to Great, a five-year study of why certain companies triumph over time, focus is rooted in a Greek parable about a hedgehog and a fox. In any contest between the two, the fox – sleek, surefooted and cunning – would appear to be the certain winner. But the slow, waddling hedgehog has one proven defense tactic: rolling into a perfect little ball with sharp spikes pointing outward in all directions. Every day the fox charges with a new premise of attack ... and every day the hedgehog offers his simple but effective response. The hedgehog always wins.

Collins credits Isaiah Berlin for extrapolating this simple story to the business world:

Foxes pursue many ends at the same time and see the world in all its

complexity. They never [integrate] their thinking into one overall concept or unifying vision. Hedgehogs, on the other hand, simplify a complex world into a single organizing idea, a basic principle or concept that unifies and guides everything. It doesn't matter how complex the world, a hedgehog reduces all challenges and dilemmas to simple – indeed, almost simplistic – hedgehog ideas. For a hedgehog, anything that does not somehow relate to the hedgehog idea holds no relevance. (91)

In his study of more than two dozen companies and their progress from “good to great,” Collins notes that the successful organizations were built or led by “hedgehogs.” The key, he says, is for a company to determine what drives its “economic engine,” and what it can be best in the world at (“and, equally important, what it cannot be best in the world at”). It's more than a goal or intention – it's an understanding (97-98).

And more than competence and capacity – a true hedgehog engages his organization in something the members are truly, deeply passionate about. In a personal analogy – it's doing work for which you have a God-given talent, for which you're well compensated and for which you have a unshakable belief and passion. The intersection of these three “circles,” as Collins calls them, represents a viable Hedgehog Concept – whether for an individual or an entire organization (95-96).

Collins concludes, “The good-to-great companies are like hedgehogs – simple, dowdy creatures that know ‘one big thing’ and stick to it” (119). And one unexpected finding from his study: it took an average of four years for the “good-to-great” companies to develop their Hedgehog Concept.

Roy Williams is a maverick in the advertising world – enraging the creative types and frightening the clients who buy their bill of goods, by branding the majority of today’s print and broadcast ads as ineffective and unsatisfying (at best) ... and – at worst – deceitful and a waste of the advertiser’s money.

The self-proclaimed “Wizard of Ads,” Williams extols the virtues of speaking, in your advertising, “the simple, essential truth as plainly as you are able” (13). In the first of his series of Wizard of Ads books, Williams concurs with Jim Collins that passionate and successful people (and companies ... and marketing) have chosen to do one thing well rather than several things badly:

Let me repeat: “They have chosen.” Those who experience the joys of the passionate have chosen to reject all options but one. The price of passion is a willingness to say no. The average American cannot say no. This is why he is average. The temptation that defeats the average American is a thing called overchoice, a deceiver that whispers, “You don’t have to choose. You can have it all.” Overchoice creates a world of too many options. (194)

Williams likens the use of the word “no” to an experienced photographer negotiating a camera. In focusing the lens, he gets as close as possible to the subject, excluding everything from the frame except that which matters most (195). It’s this singular subject, then, which receives our undivided attention.

For every expert’s theory, there’s another pundit at the ready to dispute and disprove it. Such are the branding boy wonders Matt Ragas and B.J. Bueno. Their recent study of nine successful franchises (Star Trek, Harley-Davidson and Oprah Winfrey among them), The Power

of Cult Branding, establishes precepts for developing powerful magnetic brands based upon loyal communities of customers.

Ragas and Bueno insist that “cult brands” are inclusive:

The world is full of marketers hellbent on microtargeting their brands’ marketing messages and attributes only to select audiences. The more exclusive a product or service seems, the thinking goes, the more desirable and attractive it will supposedly become to the targeted consumers. (99-100)

They go on to rail against

. . . the same marketers that all too happily carry around imaginary profiles of their “perfect customer” as a badge of honor, as if they are delighted their brand is not for sale to the unwashed masses. It is special, segmented and snooty. How laughable. Be assured that marketers of cult brands don’t target imaginary perfect customers; [they] sell real products to real customers that fulfill real wants and needs [I]nclusiveness – not exclusiveness – should be your brand’s primary mission and battle cry. (100)

Nonetheless, the authors celebrate cult brand consumers as members of a group that want to be different – a crowd that, well, enjoys standing out in a crowd. While cult branders may not seek out only “ideal” customers, the consumers themselves certainly benefit from a sense of exclusive camaraderie and self-segmentation – a collective that welcomes them based on their appreciation for a product, a service or a certain lifestyle.

A New Concept?

One of the greatest advertising minds of the twentieth century, David Ogilvy, championed product positioning and marketing focus – long before that terminology came into vogue. In *Ogilvy on Advertising*, he offered a simple, durable definition of “positioning:”

“What the product does, and who it is for.” I could have positioned Dove as a detergent bar for men with dirty hands, but chose instead to position it as a toilet bar for women with dry skin. This is still working 25 years later. (12)

Ogilvy insisted on the value of a brand’s image, its personality, saying the personality of a product “is an amalgam of many things – its name, its packaging, its price, the style of its advertising, and, above all, the nature of the product itself” (14). He strongly believed that how the product was marketed, served to either reinforce or contradict the brand image. Though he didn’t invoke the word “focus,” David Ogilvy spoke to discovering that “one big idea,” that signal consumer benefit – and reinforcing it consistently, year after year, in all marketing campaigns.

Much has been made here of “focus” and “singularity of message” in advertising and product marketing in general. Shortly, you’ll read the opinions of four modern-day radio programmers, their takes on targeting adult contemporary radio and positioning their product for the audience. It’s interesting, though, to note that these ideas had an embryonic beginning in 1970s radio; a programming visionary no less than Bill Drake spoke in 1976 to the dangers of too broad a music format:

You’ve got to be absolutely insane to think that you can be all things to all people. [At pop-adult K-100, Los Angeles] we didn’t play the

C.W. McCall record, “Convoy.” It’s a good record, don’t doubt that, but to me, playing that would be just as bizarre as [country-formatted] KLAC playing Led Zeppelin. KLAC’s audience would think, “What the hell’s going on here?” When you get into Los Angeles or New York, you find a variety of stations doing particular types of things, and people looking for a station that hits where they’re at. I think in today’s market you gotta be crazy to think that you can take a Helen Reddy record and a Bay City Rollers record and the C.W. McCall record and put ’em all on the same radio station and not piss everybody off, you know? Now [listeners] have the possibility of finding a station that suits their taste and on a consistent basis plays what they can listen to over a sustained period of time. (269)

Rudimentary, elementary concepts by today’s standards, yes – but for the mid-1970s, Drake seemed a revolutionary.

Even more inclined to tilt at windmills was Chuck Blore, acknowledged as a radio genius who, in 1975, boldly created an entirely new format for KIIS (then a struggling AM station) in Los Angeles. It was a staggeringly complex exercise – which valued the elements between the records as much as the records themselves. Blore’s “KIIS-ettes” were mini-dramas, interviews, prosaic and poetic vignettes – material that defies description until heard in context – which were frequently tied to the lyrical content of the individual songs they introduced.

The station was designed to evoke an emotional reaction from the listener – and quickly did. KIIS was heralded as a new breed of radio station; plans emerged for a national roll-out of these produced elements. Craftsmanship of this order required a large staff of producers and

actors, not to mention a very deep creative well. Unfortunately, the money ran out long before Chuck Blore's imagination, and within a year, KIIS was left on the scrapheap of "great radio ideas ahead of their time."

Even in his failure, Blore had discovered something important about reaching listeners beyond the music. He saw the value of offering a benefit, serving a need – and resonating with the listener's life:

If you think about your audience, you have to think about them in deeper terms than just what records they like. They must have other likes and dislikes. If you start considering whether or not you can supply his other likes ... well, then suddenly you're doing the listener a favor. You're complimenting him for being more than just a record listener. Radio is the most magnificent medium ever. Because you're dealing with people, you're dealing with their head and their heart. Radio is a direct pipeline to the heart. Zap! If you do it right. (191-192)

So What Do Other Programmers Think?

The author is understandably proud of 101.5 LITE FM's performance since 1996 – besting its primary competitor and ultimately finishing first in a very difficult market. The credit, he steadfastly believes, goes to "focus:" a single benefit for a specific listener in a specific situation. In picking a target (42-year-old women) and picking a hill (workplace listening) – and being very precise about the station's key benefit (relaxation) – LITE FM has prospered from the "halo effect:" become famous for one thing, and you get credit for many things. LITE FM currently leads not only with workplace listening among adult women – but

among men and adults in general ... as well as total-week listening among women, adults and all persons. Incredibly this product for women (presented mostly by women) ranks second (behind the all-sports outlet) among adult men (Arbitron, Summer 2003).

Even in this increasingly segmented radio landscape, adult contemporary – by its very name – remains a comparatively mass-appeal format: contemporary music for adults. That’s pretty big turf to cover, and evidence would suggest that AC would benefit from additional fractionalization. The author solicited the opinions of three AC programmers – two in competitive medium markets and one in the nation’s largest market – and a programming consultant who specializes in smaller markets for a leading adult-contemporary consultancy. All four pointed to women ages 35-44 as the driving force behind AC’s success, though they differed significantly on the importance of a narrow programming and marketing focus to their futures.

Brian Taylor

Brian Taylor has spent the past three years as program director of Entercom’s WSPA-FM, Greenville-Spartanburg, South Carolina (market #59, population 785,600). He finds his station in a perpetual “death-struggle” with a nearly identical format competitor, Clear Channel’s WMYI. The two stations are regularly neck-and-neck, recently ranked sixth and seventh, respectively, among adults 25-54 (Arbitron, Spring 2003). Combine the two stations’ quarter-hour shares, and AC listenership would nearly lead the market – though it appears that neither station is prepared to flinch. Despite WMYI’s advantage in weekly cume, Taylor says his WSPA wins narrowly through longer time-spent-listening and has the leg up when it comes to workplace, older-demo and female usage.

Taylor insists it's AC's mission to attract as many women as possible – at least a three-to-two ratio over male listeners. “Men are gravy,” says Taylor. “There's no such thing as ‘mass appeal’ anymore; media has become increasingly segmented – in music, television, niche cable stations. You can no longer target ‘everybody.’” He's sought to make WSPA more relevant to an audience of working women, emphasizing to his announcers the value of on-air content centered on career, family and free-time options.

His air staff and salespeople, he says, “get it.” They've supported Taylor's efforts to compartmentalize “added-value” mentions of clients' appearances and minor promotions to recorded positions in the commercial clusters – leaving the personalities free to concentrate on relatable lifestyle material. Surprisingly, Taylor says, it was the station's new general manager who initially fretted the focus on a female audience; for awhile, at least, he expressed concern that WSPA stood to alienate 40% of its constituency.

Taylor stood his ground, saying he'd rather err on the side of being too narrow – and the female ratings have risen to prove his point. His GM, meantime, has backed off on the issue.

Brian Taylor has stopped short of developing a profile of WSPA's target listener. Like the other programmers surveyed, he says he's heard apocryphal tales of such exercises at other stations and given thought from time to time to a similar discipline. Even a demo as narrow as “women 35-44” paints a wide brushstroke, Taylor believes, “everything from housewives to attorneys,” making it difficult to develop a “one-size-fits-all” model for guiding the station.

Jim Walton

Today, Jim Walton programs Univision's classic rock KIOT, Albuquerque (market #71, population 601,700). Prior to his current assignment, he served as program director for

crosstown classic country KKRK and AC KMGA. Walton benefits from having managed multiple stations for multiple owners in the same market – as well as a brief stint programming a CBS-owned classic rock property in Dallas. He, too, feels that a predominantly female audience is essential for success in adult contemporary; a 75/25 ratio is ideal.

Like WSPA's Taylor, Walton believes that for AC, a male audience is a gift:

An aberration. For some guys, AC is bringing them something they never knew they wanted. Men's "bullshit buzzers" are more sensitive than women's. They're looking for something more honest and real. Stress is a universal, and, properly done, AC radio taps into that need for stress-relief. It doesn't matter if you're female or male, if a radio station gives you something you need – consistently and dependably – the listener will develop an emotional affinity, an attachment to the station.

Even though Walton describes the core audience for adult contemporary as 35-to-44-year-old women, he resists the call to create one model listener profile. He finds it too limiting and believes it places stations in all but the largest markets, in danger of becoming too narrow. "A lot of stations do the 'Betty' thing," says Walton, referring to the tendency for these listener prototypes to carry a human name. "But, for example, when [the KMGA] sales department asked for one profile to help define the target, I came back with six different profiles." All were women, all professional – but they differed slightly in age, marital status, children in the household, and residential neighborhood. Walton says it served to underscore the female core of the station, while illustrating the variety of lifestyles among KMGA's audience.

Walton is quick to acknowledge that competition in his market has gotten stiffer in the past five years, and by and large, most stations have become more focused. Those few that

haven't, he says, are "lazy and loose-minded." Often, Walton maintains, the radio stations (irrespective of format) that make the biggest mistakes in this area are those that are at the peak of maturation. It's at this point that management believes the station is invincible and can broaden its service and appeal. Much like Ries and Trout's cautionary tales of powerful brands gone astray through line-extension, so, too, can an otherwise successful radio station sully its value by lengthening its playlist, scattering its marketing message, and greedily attempting to court a wider demographic.

It requires discipline, says Walton, to remain focused – and the greatest stations are those that find a way to extend the maturation stage of their life cycle by staying true to those attributes and listener benefits that brought them success in the first place.

Daniel Anstandig

Radio stations pay Daniel Anstandig for his advice. More correctly, radio stations pay his employer, McVay Media in Cleveland (a subsidiary of Clear Channel Communications), for Anstandig's advice. Though Anstandig has never programmed a station of his own – and, at age 20, has yet to be welcomed into a bar – he's been working for radio stations since he was in grade school and possesses a perspective as mature and insightful as anyone twice his age. He's primarily responsible for McVay's adult contemporary and Christian AC clients in smaller markets such as Evansville, Sarasota and Colorado Springs.

Anstandig agrees that women 35-44 are the bulls-eye in AC radio though he won't point to an ideal female-to-male ratio. "There's no danger zone," he says, "if you're 80/20, even 90/10 – if your intent is to sell a female audience." Caution needs to be exercised, Anstandig warns, in

the smallest markets; it is possible for a station's age demographic to be too narrow in towns like these, to attract a viable consumer base.

Finally, a vote for a target listener profile: Anstandig says such an exercise can be extremely valuable – especially in less sophisticated situations where a smaller station's programming and sales staffs lack extensive experience. Not only can creating a model listener galvanize the air staff, it can greatly assist an account executive in explaining a station's concept and appeal to a retail advertiser. Nonetheless he guards against leaning on one model for too long, and encourages periodic freshening of the profile; it helps the personalities understand the need to constantly “reintroduce” the station – its attributes and benefits – to the audience.

It's important, Anstandig believes, to center an AC radio station around one primary benefit – though you may sell it in four or five different ways. He cites LITE FM's stress-relief orientation as a good example. During the workday, the station is valuable as an antidote to on-the-job tension and boredom. In the car – to and from work – LITE FM helps the listener to relax and (one hopes) avoid road rage. In the evenings and on the weekends, the station offers companionship and respite from the workday and workweek. The workplace is never far from LITE FM's imaging – and relaxation is always touted as the core value. Anstandig applauds the consistency of positioning LITE FM as the “Listen-While-You-Work Station” around the clock, acknowledging that – especially in a market as large as Miami – people work at all hours of the day, and listeners expect consistency from a product, whether toothpaste or radio station.

Rick Martini

For years, Clear Channel's WLTW, New York (market #1, population 15,097,900), has led Arbitron with women, adults 18-49, 25-54 and 35-64 ... and total persons 12+. The station is

a juggernaut in the nation's largest market – and, for the last four years, has remained unchallenged by any other AC competitor.

In the opposite corner is WNEW, once a legendary, seminal progressive rock station – now an embarrassment to Infinity Radio, following a disastrous experiment with talk programming (culminating in the 2002 Opie and Anthony “Sex for Sam” stunt in St. Patrick's Cathedral, which resulted in an FCC fine exceeding \$350,000). A misguided attempt to reinvent the station as a music and entertainment-talk vehicle aimed at women – “Blink 102.7” – lasted less than a year and churned through another entire staff of producers and talent. Finally, a music-intensive version of Blink took the frequency to new lows, causing one of Infinity's flagship properties to finish 2003 with a 0.7 Arbitron share, persons 12+ (Summer 2003).

Into this desperate, daunting situation has walked Rick Martini, the former program director of Tribune's heritage AC, KOSI, Denver. Martini, a New York native, spent the past year as midday personality at the Clear Channel AC outlet on Long Island. When the music director's post opened at WNEW, he lunged for it – and knowing that the target in the crosshairs was WLTW made it an especially attractive opportunity.

Despite Martini's considerable experience in Denver and his familiarity with the New York market, the author was surprised by Martini's view of the impending duel with WLTW, and what approach WNEW might take. While he shares the belief that women 35-44 are the core of adult contemporary radio, and that an audience composition anywhere from 70 to 80% female is ideal, Martini still idolizes full-service AC stations: those that can offer a mix of mainstream music as well as news, sports and a large community-oriented morning program. It's those stations, he says, which can attract adult men with their service elements, while retaining women through the music.

While in one breath Martini criticizes WLTW's tendency in recent years to broaden its playlist – becoming, perhaps, too wide – he suggests that the new version of WNEW will be at once an amalgamation of current pop, some 90s product, a sizable dose of 80s material as well as 70s disco and dance tunes “with a New York appeal.” Further, WNEW's presentation will reportedly be more foreground and more vibrant – more in touch with listeners living in the city, than those in the New Jersey or New York suburbs.

Throughout the conversation, there was no sense that WNEW could be used for a specific purpose – nor would it offer any particular benefit to the listener. Martini claims that developing a profile of a station's target listener is a “great exercise, but it would be difficult to do for a station in New York City because of the huge population and wide geographic area.” He admires the success and precise targeting of the author's station, yet seemingly fails to recognize the potential advantage for his own situation. Even in more stable, healthy circumstances at Denver's KOSI, Martini says there was no need to create a listener profile or declare a particularly narrow demographic; that station, he says, was very promotionally driven. “You knew who the audience was, you saw them at all the station appearances and concerts.”

Reports are that the WNEW project is under close scrutiny – from a variety of Infinity executives including Mel Karmazin himself – as well as the station's own program managers; the old bromide describing a camel as “a horse designed by committee” couldn't be more apt. With so many people offering so much contrasting input, and providing no distinct focus for the station, WNEW is in jeopardy of remaining a ship without a rudder. It's the author's opinion that WLTW is a complacent, poorly crafted product, vulnerable to attack. But as long as WNEW lacks a Hedgehog Concept – that “one big thing” that they're best in the world at, and they're deeply passionate about – WLTW will remain an elusive quarry.

The universe tends toward disorder. Corporate America celebrates growth and the grand scale. With these colossal forces against it, it shouldn't come as a shock that a business as "seat-of-the-pants" as radio continues to ignore the lessons of focus. Even the most enlightened programmers seem reluctant to narrow their beam – insecure, perhaps, that they'll diminish their audiences to a point that costs them their jobs.

To be certain, remaining true to a single concept, a single constituency, requires discipline, and it isn't instantly successful. But it is analogous to a laser – a few watts of energy focused in a narrow beam of light – which, over time, can drill a hole in a diamond. Similarly focused on one demographic, one environment for usage, and one particular benefit, a radio station can – and in at least one case, has ultimately dominated its market.

Works Cited

- Anstandig, Daniel. Telephone interview. Dec. 8, 2003.
- Blore, Chuck. First interview with Claude Hall. This Business of Radio Programming. 2nd ed. Los Angeles: O'Liners, 2000. 176-193.
- Collins, Jim. Good to Great. New York: HarperCollins, 2001.
- Drake, Bill. Second interview with Claude Hall. This Business of Radio Programming. 2nd ed. Los Angeles: O'Liners, 2000. 261-276.
- Martini, Rick. Telephone interview. Dec. 11, 2003.
- Ogilvy, David. Ogilvy on Advertising. New York: Vintage Books, 1985.
- Ragas, Matthew W., and Bolivar J. Bueno. The Power of Cult Branding. Roseville, Calif.: Prima Venture, 2002.
- Ries, Al. Focus. New York: HarperBusiness, 1996.
- Ries, Al, and Jack Trout. Bottom-Up Marketing. New York: Plume, 1990.
- . Positioning: The Battle for Your Mind. New York: Warner, 1982.
- . The Twenty-two Immutable Laws of Marketing. New York: HarperCollins, 1993.
- Sarnoff, David. "'Radio Music Box' memo." United States Early Radio History. Ed. Thomas H. White. 2003. Dec. 12, 2003 <<http://earlyradiohistory.us/1916rmb.htm>>.
- Taylor, Brian. Telephone interview. Dec. 9, 2003.
- Walton, Jim. Telephone interview. Dec. 9, 2003.
- Williams, Roy H. The Wizard of Ads. Austin: Bard Press, 1998.