

Music Testing That Gets Results: Is your station looking at “what the party wants to hear” or your listeners’ actual preferences?

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Music testing has come a long way baby, and rightfully so since it can have a huge impact on a station’s ratings and bottom line. Still, many stations are stuck in the old ways of doing things. When will PDs at these stations wake up and smell the coffee?

Old and new methods of music testing can be best compared to listening to music at a party versus driving alone in your car. When you go to a party and hear your host’s favorite music, some you like and some you don’t. Still, you go with the flow and listen to what others are getting in to, even though you may not enjoy each song. Driving in your car by yourself with nothing but the radio to entertain you, what do you listen to? Your favorite music, of course. While in your car, at the office, or at home, where you are more likely to listen to the radio, you quickly pick the station playing your favorite songs and automatically steer clear of those that are not.

So what is wrong with auditorium music testing? It’s like going to your friend’s party, and listening to their music. It may or may not be your favorite, but instead of complaining, you conform to fit in.

Old fashioned methods of auditorium-style music testing capitalize on “the party mentality,” corralling large groups of people into a hotel ballroom where music is blasted over a loudspeaker on a given night, and testing is influenced by the group. The participants at this party are often regularly paid attendees who know each other because they have met several times in the last few months at other focus groups and product testing events in the area. This is a nice way to add another income to the family and pays better than most \$10 per hour jobs out there. Unfortunately, the party is pretty boring—most people really don't like music and especially the music they are playing in the auditorium. Although filling in the black dots on the form can get really tedious, it’s only three hours and the money is good.

Yet many PDs and their stations still rely on these old fashioned tests, subjecting participants to same speed question and answer interrogations prompting them to monotonously fill in bubbles or turn a dial. Many still expect these tests to help improve ratings, even though participants are not always accurately screened as good representatives of the target audience and may just be “going with the flow,” versus displaying true opinions.

Still others are breaking out of the mold of stale testing methodologies and are obtaining better results because of new technologies that also make their jobs easier. Participants are called at random to ensure they are truly listeners of a given station and like the music played there. Using a state-of-the art system for scoring music, they are allowed to take the test whenever it’s convenient and are still paid \$80, a win/win situation for everyone.

For PDs who want to make a change in their station's music testing, what should they look for? Smart PDs know that better testing means increased ratings and higher scores from management, and they seek out solutions that contain the following:

Strong methods of screening to target the station's main audience and full access to that information.

Successful music testing is only as good as the information and opinions that go into it, yet many PDs have no idea "what's in the sausage," so to speak, because traditional testing companies often do not give them access to information on the demographics and details of testing attendees. PDs need to make sure decisions are based on opinions from qualified attendees versus a room "filled with bodies." A good music testing company will enable you to select specific criteria on the audience you want to target and provide you with full details on individuals that took your test afterwards, so that you know you are making good station decisions based on solid information. Some even let PDs monitor test-taking via live web -cam stream.

Interactive testing that emulates the real-life radio listening environment.

As mentioned, hotel ballroom auditorium music testing emulates "being at the party" versus the actual listening experience. New methods, like one-on-one touch screen testing, more accurately simulate the intimate, real-world radio-listening environment. Participants can take tests in centrally located facilities at a time that works for them as well as rate songs using everyday terminology selected by the PD, like, "loved it," "hated it," etc. versus using an esoteric number scale or dial, and each test taker gets a random song order to prevent monotony of rating songs that fall at the end. Interactive software and phone testing allow instant data gathering—nothing slips between the cracks because every button on the phone, keystroke on the web, or touch on the screen is instantly captured and registered as a part of music testing results.

A variety of reports to measure results.

Access to reports, and the ability to sort the data behind them, is critical to help PDs make smart decisions about song selection and ratings. A good testing company should provide a variety of reporting formats and enable information to be accessed real time via the Web, through email or Excel files, CD-ROM, via hard copy versions, etc. The ability to sort information by categories such as familiarity, median, burn, dislike scores, rank positions and quintile counts and customize data can make it easier to get at the heart of the information. Color pie charts and bar graphs help visualize demo, gender and overall comparisons between songs to enhance decision-making.

Take it a step further.

Why not capitalize on music testing to learn even more about your target audience? Innovative new methods of testing are letting PDs ask perceptual questions based on how respondents scored songs. For example, interactive systems may determine that, based on the respondent's past 15 composite scores, he or she liked another station's music better and may then pose questions about the competitive station's DJ's or the commercials they run to get more on why he/she feels that way. New interactive options give PDs the

ability to get feedback on potential station commercials, jingles, hosts, etc.—not just the music.

The next time you are listening to the radio in your car or at a party, think about what a difference the listening environment makes. As a PD or station manager, wouldn't you rather use a testing method that more accurately emulates real life? Interactive, touch-screen testing creates a whole new way of thinking beyond the technology to the entire process of taking testing to a much more personal level. After all, music testing is supposed to be about understanding the individual preferences of your listeners, right?

Maybe the next time you are invited to a party you will bring along your favorite music and ask the host to allow you to play what you want to hear. That would be cool. Try taking that music to the Auditorium at the local Ramada on Wednesday night from 7 to 10 and see if they give your music a play.

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