

"A business has to be involving, it has to be fun, and it has to exercise your creative instincts"...

Richard Branson



BROADCAST PROGRAMMING & RESEARCH

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## SNAPSHOTS

This month BP&R welcomes new clients:

Classique FM, France. Radio Hamburg, Germany

BP&R is currently testing our Xplorer and CATI software systems on the new Microsoft Windows Vista platform. Stay tuned for any tips on the new operating environment.

At BP&R we love to receive your feedback on articles and receive suggestions for future articles. Don't hesitate in contacting us.

*In our next Newsletter: "IS RADIO DEAD YET?"*

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## The Art Of The Aircheck

By Wayne Clouten

I can remember as a young aspiring presenter being absolutely petrified by my first air check session with the Programme Director. I recall it being akin to the nervousness you get when a doctor pulls on a rubber glove or pulls out a syringe from a draw. Thankfully my fears were never realized and in fact I now wish there had been more constructive air check sessions during my on-air days. Air checks are about enforcing a personal discipline to review what we do in order to be

better tomorrow. They are about the pursuit of excellence, substituting what we don't do so well with what makes us shine.

In this article I'll discuss a few basic rules to follow in getting the most out of your air check sessions.

### 1. Frequency.

In an ideal world you would review your morning show daily and other shifts at least once a week. If you are doing a daily air check, the

focus is incremental development. Make the air check session short and focused on just a few things. If you attempt to review everything every day the sessions will become long and boring and cease being constructive.

Whatever frequency of air check session you set... make sure you stick to it. Consistency is critical. The on-air product is the ultimate priority; don't send the wrong message by being ad-hoc about your commitment to air checking.

### "don't send the wrong message by being ad-hoc about your commitment to air checking"

### 2. Aircheck Length.

This depends on the relative talk content of your radio station but a sample of one telescoped hour generally does it for me. Rotate the hours and days that you air check. Don't make the DJ air check themselves. It's best they don't know when you are going to aircheck, you don't want them "performing" to the air check session and you don't want them nervous about it either. Call me old fashioned but I like a recording of the actual air-program not a pristine audio

feed from the studio.

### 3. Environment.

This is where you can have fun and loosen up the review process. If at all possible get out of your office. A great way to listen to the station or an aircheck is to jump in the car and go for a drive. You do the driving while the presenter makes the notes. Stop for a coffee before returning to the studio, review your notes and agree the ideas to be pursued and issues to be corrected.

### 4. Execution.

The most important thing is that air check sessions must be constructive and creative, not only about enforcing operational discipline. Anything deserving of a disciplinary conversation like following the format, air-gaps and paneling mistakes etc is best done as it happens or immediately following a shift. This may not be always possible and sometimes you might miss a mistake that is captured by an air check...cont

Do you have some news, a tip, suggestion or question?

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This is one of the reasons a PD must always listen to an aircheck before discussing it with the DJ even if you pretend you are listening to it for the first time. You can never be too prepared and its often very helpful to think through what you want to say.

I suggest separating the discipline talk from the creative talk. If required start by saying "now before we get into the air check we need to talk about some air gaps I've been hearing". Talk through the operational issues first before getting into the real "meat" of the air check.

The "meat" as I call it; is the structure, subject matter, pace, length, vocabulary and wit of the presenters adlibs.

Their empathy, rapport, timing and spontaneity with fellow presenters and callers.

The naturalness and attitude of their personality and finally the timbre and emotion of their voice.

One of my early mentors played a great trick on me to demonstrate how I wasn't being natural. He secretly recorded me talking at a party then played it back

afterwards, comparing the sound of my air work to my natural personality...it really drove home his point!



A fundamental to assessing any radio show is having a plan for the show. You may think the format clock is enough but I like also using a scorecard that itemizes all of the key things we are trying to achieve each hour, particularly if we are talking about a show with more than one presenter, like a morning show team. Did we make them laugh? Did we have a "WOW"; Did we make a listener famous? Did we celebrate our music?

List your show goals on a card and have the team score them out of 10 during the aircheck session. A really professional team won't need an aircheck; they will score their work after every show!

The FRI's (Frequently Re-occurring Issues) of air check sessions are:

- a. Rushing the call sign or positioning statement.
- b. Talking too much

- c. Leaning on the same word or phrase (crutch words)
- d. Not listening to callers or colleagues.
- e. Over-talking callers and colleagues.
- f. Clipping or talking over songs.
- g. Being repetitive.

h. Laughing at their own jokes when there wasn't actually anything really funny to laugh about.

### 5. Setting Goals

At the end of an air check session you should have a list of things that the DJ acknowledges would be improvements to their show. These may include working on the substitution of a "crutch word or phrase" all the way through to a new phone call topic the DJ is going to try.

It's important for the PD to say "now is there anything I can do to help here" You and the DJ must each walk away with the same list.

If you keep a diary then write them down for future reference.

### 6. Follow Up

The key responsibility for the programmed director immediately following an aircheck session is listening intently to the very next show the DJ does for the agreed improvements or ideas and being quick to reward or warn by acknowledgment. Hopefully you will hear the DJ at least making an effort to do whatever it is was agreed.

Immediate positive reinforcement is a great motivator. Likewise if the DJ fails to correct a problem they know you are on their case and you won't let it go.

I was hoping to spend some time discussing the detail of how to handle different personality types but that will have to wait for another time.

Remember there is one task a PD can NEVER do too much of...that's listening to your presenters and the competition.

**"A really professional team won't need an aircheck; they will score their work after every show"**