

PROGRAMMING TO WIN

by John Silliman Dodge



How Things Work

Programming to Win requires synchronicity, which requires that the programming, sales, production, traffic and engineering departments work together like a well-tuned engine. At too many of our stations, that engine is pushing blue smoke out the back. Often, the root cause of this misalignment is that we're too zoomed in on our own areas of responsibility to see the Bigger Picture. So let's take a step back for a moment. Let's look at radio like it's a car.

This is the perfect analogy because a car is also a collection of interdependent systems — mechanical, electrical, and hydraulic all of which rely on one another to make the vehicle function smoothly. If our brakes fail, it doesn't matter that the engine is perfect — we crash. If cars could talk, they would tell us...maybe in a German or a Japanese accent... "I'm only as good as all the components and systems I work with." That's because they don't have big egos like we do. It wouldn't occur to them to say, "I deliver the numbers but the guys in sales couldn't sell wood to termites."

When your car is performing under par, you go for a tune-up. When your station is underperforming, one of the common causes is lack of Business Empathy. The managers aren't putting themselves in their co-managers' shoes and seeing the game as the other guy sees it. Sound familiar? Let's do some diagnostics.

For example, a smart PD knows sales well enough to understand the pressures on the street. He knows the hoops that account execs have to jump through just to get appointments, not to mention contracts. He knows that selling radio is hard work. You have to be competitive and smart and strong and persistent to succeed. Your skin has to be thick and your mind has to be quick. Great sales people are hard to recruit and even harder to hold on to because the brightest talent often passes through radio and on to other forms of media or advertising. So when you do find an account exec that gets it, who knows how to listen, who knows the meaning of customer service, give him your utmost cooperation and respect. Smart PD's give their AE's ammunition. You never hear the words, "That's your problem." You hear, "What do you need, how can we help?"

Now switch positions. One of the key attributes of a great sales exec is that he/she understands the prod-

uct and doesn't attempt to compromise quality for short-term gain in any way, shape or form. He knows that the PD and the Promotion Director are partners, not adversaries. They're the brand managers who make the quality product that he represents, and he knows their role is to nurture and protect that product like it was their children. In sales meetings, smart AE's listen first, listen second, and think third before they speak. When they do finally speak, the first words customers hear are typically more questions designed to tease out more needs. Smart AE's don't sell "spots," they design custom business solutions contoured to individual clients. They play the long game because they know that it's smarter, more efficient and more effective to give great service to clients and by so doing, foster enduring business relationships. The alternative is to keep churning and cranking out the cold calls. We know the "bad AE" stereotype too well, so let me just close with another analogy. (In fact, I'm thinking of joining Analogists Anonymous. I hear they have a program that helps you learn to describe stuff just as it is without comparing it to other stuff.) The stereotypically bad AE is like the guy in the bar who you just know, right from his opening line, your underwear is the only thing he's interested in.

Some of this apparent dysfunction is built right into our commercial radio system. When you sell a product to two different groups of customers whose needs and desires are routinely in conflict, you're gonna have tension. But if you have to come down on one side or the other between these two customers — listeners and advertisers — you better be on the listener's side more often than not. We've seen what happens when we lean the other way.

The next exercise is for GM's: send your PD and your Sales Manager into a room. Make them take truth serum and go in there alone so they don't have to posture for their audience. When they come out, make each one chair the other guy's next meeting — the PD addresses the sales meeting and the Sales Manager addresses the Programming meeting. The topic: here's what life looks like on our side of the building and what we need from you to make the Big Machine go.

Next, get your Production Director and your AE's into a room. Your Production guy can help AE's to better understand how radio advertising works — what's

effective, what isn't, how to make memorable messages and how to sell creative design strategies to clients. In return, your AE's can help your occasionally insulated Studio God to better understand just how life is like on the ground.

Finally, if you're a PD, get your listeners and your talent into a room, though not necessarily into the same room. Let talent see the focus groups in action. This can be like tough love because often we want to shield our babies from the storm. But they're grown-ups for the most part and they can handle the truth. Until talent sees themselves the way listeners see them, they won't know how to maximize their act.

These empathy exercises are all about getting mechanically tuned-up. It's the same in any business, with manufacturing, distribution, sales and marketing, and administration all needing to interact optimally with one another. Once everyone has the big picture in mind, as well as how their individual piece contributes to that big picture, you can kick things up to the next level. And that level will be the subject for another article, perhaps called "How Magic Works." Here's the gist:

Remember the first time you listened to every radio station that you've ever truly loved? Sure, you can probably remember some cool songs and some cool production, but chances are there was an indescribable Overarching Coolness that attracted you most. The talent was larger than life — entertaining, compelling, provocative. The station had a sound. It bristled with spirit and enthusiasm. It was informed and connected to the community at the hip — nothing happened in your town that the station didn't wrap its legs around. It had imagination — it went places you wouldn't predict it would go. Whatever formats and formulas it employed were invisible — it just oozed high gear show business. Remember that station? Let's all go to work at that station again.

John Silliman Dodge is a radio Swiss Army Knife. He's announced, produced and programmed formats from metal to kids to classical. John pioneered the modern classical approach at WCRB/Boston. Today he gives interactive training workshops and consults radio stations on announcer performance and staff motivation. John also announces for Sirius Satellite Radio. E-mail him at john@sillimandodge.com or visit www.sillimandodge.com.