

# PROGRAMMING TO WIN

by John Silliman Dodge

## The Seven Essentials Of Success



I worship talent. Whether it's great acting, musicianship, athletic or artistic ability, or great radio talent, expressing oneself creatively in a performance setting is the essence of what being a human being is all about. When I was a programmer, getting a cool rotation or a promotion on the air was satisfying, but nothing compared to the thrill of nurturing great air talent so they can perform at an even higher level.

I just came from the Morning Show Boot Camp in New Orleans where I gave a presentation called "The Seven Essentials Of Success." This article is about those *essentials* meaning **MUST** have, not nice to have. Nobody I know who has achieved real success in music, movies or sports — the three areas that map most closely to what we do as radio performers — nobody I know ever neglects the fundamentals. Even **Andre Agassi**, the grand old man of tennis at 35 still hits every day. **Eric Clapton** still plays guitar every day. So let's consider these fundamentals for radio success:

**Essential #7: Get Out Of The Studio And Into The Streets.** Too many of us are guilty of *Inside Out* thinking, of seeing the world from our perspective and not our customers' perspective. We think our fans love us, they listen every minute of every day, and the smallest details of our lives are intimate knowledge to them. So we don't have to bother with the little things like responding to phones and e-mail, or even wondering what's going on in our listener's minds because basically, it's all about us, right? Wrong. It's *essential* that we take every opportunity to take our listeners' temperature and get to know their issues and concerns, their likes and dislikes, their loves and hot buttons. And do you realize just how many people who don't listen to your show today *would* listen and probably become P1's if they had a chance

to meet you? Not just slide by you at a remote, but shake your hand and hear you ask about their job and their girlfriend or their kids or whatever matters most deeply to them? These people can become your biggest fans because now they know you personally. It's the power of **TOUCH** and **FACE TIME**. Get an active life outside the studio so you become more interesting and relatable inside the studio.

**Essential #6: Go To PREP School And Make The Grades.** Whether you've been in the game for five months or 25 years, you can never stray from the basics of the craft. Because that's what announcing is — a craft like guitar or tennis. All great performers go through the same four phases, so I've created an easy-to-remember acronym: **PREP**, which stands for *prepare, rehearse, edit, and perform*.

**Prepare** means gathering materials from your imagination, from the corner store, from your community, your region, your universe and combining that material in new, interesting, compelling, and entertaining ways. Show prep techniques could take our entire article so let's save that for another time. But let me just suggest that you always want to gather more material than you think you need. You'll use it all, though not necessarily in the ways you imagine.

**Rehearse** means practice. When I was ten, the greatest guitar player who ever lived (not Jimi, he was number two), **Andres Segovia** tapped his finger on my chest and told me in his old Spanish man accent, "You practice." It was the best advice I ever got. I'm amazed at how many announcers don't consider rehearsal to be fundamental. Performers who wing it every time, who just pop the first thing out of their mouth like their brain was some

big gum ball machine. (BTW, if you got to be Number One by shooting from the hip, then obviously I'm not talking about you. I'm taking about every *other* performer who doesn't feel the need to rehearse.) Real pros lock their material down so tight that it sounds like it's coming off the top of their head.

**Edit.** "Less is more" is not just a spot load reduction policy — it's a fundamental way to make communication tighter, more effective and more powerful. All the great writers you know throw away ten times more words than they write by the time you read the book. Copy them.

**Perform** is the fun part. The adrenaline juices our system, stage energy kicks in and the red light goes ON. I conduct announcer performance workshops so I won't try to squeeze this vital topic into a scant fifty words, but here's a good performance checklist to consider: *A is for Attitude. B is for Balance. C is for Content. D is for Delivery. F is for Formatics.*

**Essential #5: iPod** might mean something different for **Steve Jobs**, but for us it stands for Interactive, Personalized, and On-Demand. These attributes are the secret sauce of the Web, and the more we add them to our show and our station, the more successful we will become. Interactive means going beyond the phones and responding to listeners through every available channel. E-mail and IM are great ways to offer instant and individual feedback. You can't get to everybody, but you *can* make a big deal about the folks that you do get to, and then make sure the rest of your audience knows about it. The result is greater *perceived* interactivity.

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**Personalize** your communication to listeners. Software tools let you capture contact information and individual interests, then communicate via e-mail in a seemingly one-to-one fashion. This is smart, targeted, opt-in, direct marketing. If you're not doing this today, you're still operating in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

**On-Demand.** The Web delivers what people want when they want it. So emulate the Web and take every bit of cool audio you have — interviews, guest artist performances, great bits, and new releases — and make it available on your site. Promote the Web site with the same energy that you promote the station because today, radio and Web must be joined at the hip in one mutually supportive, integrated machine.

**Essential #4: Take Charge And Do It Yourself.** We live in an era of rising expectations and shrinking budgets. Today we to have to be our own promotion department, our own publicity, marketing, and show development department because nobody else is going to do it for us. Besides getting out of the station and pressing the people's flesh like Rock and Roll politicians, we need to become a known quantity with anyone in the local media who is in a position to write or talk about us. And do this immediately, because the time to make a friend is not when you need one.

Other do-it-yourself tips: You've heard of *Continuous Quality Improvement*? Debrief every single morning show, not just the great ones or the awful ones. Never schedule anything until that session is done. How else are you going to amplify the good parts and mark the rough spots for deletion? And here's a great way to avoid the ruts we all slip into. I call it *The 3 x 3 x 3 Rule*. Once a quarter or every six months, find three things you've never done before and add them to your routine. Find three

things you regularly do that aren't really working anymore, things that are stale or tired or boring and delete them. Finally, find three things you're great at and do even more of them.

**Essential #3: Get A Coach.** If you spend quality time — meaning focused, positive, productive, growth-enhancing performance critique time with your talent (or your PD) every single week, then congratulations. But even if you don't have that kind of time, talent development still *must* get done. If you think that music is a differentiator today, think again. Listeners can get your music anywhere, anytime. If I want to clone your station — your playlist, your promotions, and your attitude — I can do that tomorrow. But there's one thing I can't copy: your people. The all-important relationships that our announcers have with the audience are unique to our station and *us*. That's our true competitive edge. So it's important to develop our talent or reach out and partner with someone who can help us, because again and again I see that personalized, professional performance coaching pays off in ratings, revenue and career growth.

**Essential #2: Blow Yourself Up.** We ran a high energy, interactive exercise in our Boot Camp session that I call *Creative Destruction*. Here's the gist: on some kind of regular basis, you need to switch roles and ask yourself, "How would I put my station (or my show) out of business if I were a new competitor debuting against me tomorrow?" We're used to focusing on our strengths. We routinely seek opportunities. But regularly go to the other side of the SWOT analysis and assess your weaknesses and any threats to your position. Attack yourself creatively and offensively. Bulletproof yourself first before somebody fills you full of holes.

**#1 Essential of Success: Stop Talking, Start Listening.** In the grocery line, at the

promotions, around the focus group table, in the after show meetings and aircheck sessions, and most of all, on the air. When we plough through with our heads down, operating from our assumptions and preconceptions, we miss valuable information and opportunities. It takes focus, energy, and restraint for radio people to stop talking and listen carefully, but the feedback we get makes it all worthwhile.

Today we have the best of times *and* the worst of times. The worst because how could things possibly get any more competitive than this? Web, Wi-Fi, iPod, Jack, satellite, cell phone, and I swear that micro-transmitters up your fillings are next. But it's the best of times today because I've just come from the Morning Show Boot Camp where there were *talent scouts* — I'm talking Big Guys from Big Companies actively seeking the next generation of great radio talent. This means our industry has finally awakened to the fact that a cool music list by itself just won't cut it anymore. Now we've come full circle to where we started from: the Big Show is all about talent. Are you ready for this?

*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 [john@sillimandodge.com](mailto:john@sillimandodge.com) or visit [www.sillimandodge.com](http://www.sillimandodge.com).*

