

PROGRAMMING TO WIN

by John Silliman Dodge



Think Like A Customer, Act Like An Owner

I'm pretty sure **George Harrison** didn't have copyright infringement in mind when he wrote "My Sweet Lord" back in 1970. Nevertheless, the publishers of "He's So Fine," the **Chiffon's** #1 hit from 1963, recognized an income opportunity when they saw one and they busted George to the tune of \$1.6 million for "unconscious attribution." With that legal precedent in mind, I'm admitting right up front that I didn't invent the title of this article. So don't be sending your lawyers after me, ok?

It's 5:30 in the morning and I'm cruising through a downstairs backroom of the **Alaska Airlines** terminal at **LAX** when a sign on the wall stops me in my tracks, a sign meant for the employees: *Think Like A Customer, Act Like An Owner*. I pull out the field notebook I carry everywhere and immediately write this down. *Think Like A Customer, Act Like An Owner*. I believe that we could solve 90 percent of the business problems we face by turning those eight words into our industry-wide mission statement.

If we thought like customers instead of Radio Insiders, we would stop selling features with low or no emotional impact, such as (imitation voice of God) "Ten-in-a-row-commercial-free!" followed by a big bang blaster. We'd delete the '80s-vintage imaging tricks and start talking to listeners like they were real people. We'd deal with matters that matter to them. We'd start showcasing the *real* benefits of listening to our radio station (which we can enumerate, right?). We'd start producing *Reality Radio*.

If we thought like customers, we'd know that the real reason listeners come to us is not for our playlist (they can get that), not for the traffic reports (they can get those), not for the bumper stickers or the beer or the babes. It's for the PEOPLE, the feel of family, and the familiarity of community. Notorious zipper control issues aside, **Bill Clinton** was a pretty good president. Bill's campaign sign read: "It's the Economy, Stupid." Ours should substitute the word "People."

If we thought like customers, we'd acknowledge that their entertainment options are increasing at a dizzying pace. Radio used to be the number one source for music, news and information, lifestyle and community, the

whole banana. We're still big, but no longer the only banana in the bunch. And frankly, it's a challenge adjusting to this new reality. We're like the only child who gets new siblings and has to reestablish his place in the family dynamic.

If we thought more like listeners, we'd adapt and incorporate all of the new channels they use into our production -- Web, cell phones, blogs, IM, chat, podcasts, and all the rest. Some of us dabble in media technology now. Others don't feel comfortable because somehow these channels are "not radio." Remember that **Steve Jobs** turned his company's fortunes around smartly by stepping away from his original definition of **Apple** as a personal computer company. Steve literally got outside the box.

If we acted like owners, we'd have more vision. We'd recognize that we're in the early stages of a fundamental, long range shift in the way people access, enjoy, and share their media. People don't care anymore where their stuff comes from so long as they get their stuff. They don't differentiate between satellite radio, terrestrial radio, Web radio, and pod radio. It's *all* radio to them. And because we've made ourselves vulnerable over the past few decades by surgically removing most of the personality from our radio stations, we've left listeners with just the music, which they can now get on their own, thank you very much, been nice knowing you, goodbye.

If we acted like owners, we'd drink stronger coffee. We'd burn more midnight oil. We'd become better competitors. Realizing that our twentieth century programming and business models are slipping away, we would hustle to *innovate* and not just react to the market. We'd be coming up with new lines, new products, new programs, new marketing channels, new personalities, new *anything* for the sake of sheer newness. What do we have? We've got Jack.

If we acted like owners, we would never again hear the words, "That's not my job, that's not my area of responsibility, they don't pay me to do that." This attitude is so twentieth century, so us-and-them, so anti-entrepreneurial and counter-productive. These words are the sure sign of a person who doesn't love his work. What I don't get is, why in the world would

you clock-punch and spend your most valuable currency -- your time -- doing work you'd don't love? Your time *is* your life. No difference.

If we acted like owners, we'd teach our coworkers to act like owners too -- from the GM to the receptionist. Ever wonder why our employees too often turn to us and ask for solutions to problems we know they could solve on their own? Could it have something to do with the way we lead and the messages we send about personal responsibility? Consider how we can empower someone by saying, "When a situation comes up with a listener or a client or a vendor, I want you to handle it like you own the business. You're a smart person. You'll do the right thing." Just watch what happens with performance when you express sincere confidence in this way. Watch how efficient and effective things become when we push decisions down to their lowest possible level and cut the tape required to get everything but the major decisions done.

If you want to tap your best thinking, your most creative and imaginative energies, then take these two concepts straight to heart and *Think Like A Customer, Act Like An Owner*. Put the shoe on the other foot and view your radio world from your listeners' perspective. Become as fiercely loyal to them as you would like them to be in return. Operate like your listeners are your lifeblood. Then once you get a really clear picture from their point of view, be fearless and act on it. Ask yourself, "What would I do if this were my own personal business, with my life's resources tied to its success, with my reputation at stake?"

Are we ready to change our mission statements and *Think Like A Customer, Act Like An Owner*? It's a big stretch, an exciting stretch. Imagine you own the place. What will you do now?

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.