

PROGRAMMING TO WIN

by John Silliman Dodge



Voice Tracking: Here To Stay, So Let's Make The Best Of It

Here's an increasingly familiar scene: a talented announcer in Market A finishes his live morning show and then jumps into the studio next door to produce another morning show for Market B a few time zones away. After a break, he comes back to do an afternoon or evening show for Market C somewhere else. I'm sure you have an opinion about this practice. Everybody does. But just like the fable about the *Five Blind Men and the Elephant*, your point of view on Voice Tracking depends completely on where you stand.

If you're a radio stockholder, any cost reduction is good because it can mean more money in your portfolio. If you are a group owner, Wall Street routinely yanks your chain about driving revenue up and costs down. If you manage a station, you have to balance these pressures against your product quality; cut too many corners and eventually the product suffers. If you're a PD, you want your station(s) to sound great 24/7 and you want to maximize the return on your biggest budget line, your staff. If you're a talented announcer, working multiple stations or markets can mean a whole new level of job security.

But the bottom line on Voice Tracking is the bottom line — this trend is all about efficiency. For a music-intensive show, it makes no sense for a talented announcer to finish a live mic break, punch a button and then baby-sit the board while a music set plays. If he can produce his four-hour show in ninety minutes and it still sounds great, that's a good thing even if it's not live. In fact, as charges go, "Not live" is a pretty lame one. It's literally true of course, but meaningless. I doubt you have ever sat in front of your TV and told Letterman, "Dave, buddy, you would be so much funnier if you were live." A performance is either entertaining or it's not. It's either great radio or it isn't. If it is, I'm sticking around for more. If not, zap.

This "radio must be live" requirement stems from the nostalgic notion that the way things were is the way things should always remain. When the phonograph first came on the scene, the musician's unions wanted this intruder banned because they feared it would put live musicians out of work. Today we call these *disruptive technologies* because they alter and in some cases even terminate our old way of doing business. But I figure, let's not lose sleep over the way things used to be, or even the way we think things ought to be now. Voice Tracking is here to stay, so let's get to work and do it right.

While there's no arguing the economics of Voice Tracking, there is a big argument about the way they're performed. Many of the oft-cited complaints are legit — VT's can be bland, canned, generic and lifeless. I often compare Live Radio vs. Voice Tracking to a stage play and a movie. On stage your actors are plugged into the moment, walking a tightrope, adrenalized by their live audience. But film reality is mostly manufactured. Movie work happens in short set-ups, routinely out of sequence, and the actors have to stay in character only as long as the scene lasts. But at least they have a small audience to play for — the director, crew, fellow actors, etc. In Voice Tracking, which few performers are getting any kind of real training

for, we send our talent into a tiny production studio, strip away their context reality and say, "Now be great." These folks are used to operating on live stage energy. Now they sound flat. Gee, wonder why?

Voice Tracking is an acting job, but in most cases we're not supplying any acting lessons for our actors. The challenge is to generate the same kind of concentrated energy and sparkle that we do our live shows. Properly produced, we shouldn't be able to tell the difference between live and prerecorded. Not that we're trying to pass for live, but that we're so compelling and connected that "Not Live" is no longer even the issue.

VT's need to be airchecked exactly like live shows or they can suffer from under-performance, over-performance, disconnection, and more. Without sufficient coaching, announcers often just step into the box and crank out the breaks. Their performance can seem lifeless because there isn't any stage energy driving it. It can lack presence and eye contact, or become lifelessly *over-perfected* because there's nothing to stop the talent from going back and tweezing every tiny flaw. But most often, these performances are slapped together fast because tick-tock, time's a-wasting.

I've had my hand in this style of radio for more than ten years; these days in addition to all my other work, I'm on the air seven days a week at Sirius. I produce all my tracks in my Seattle studio and send them to NYC for sequencing and playback. When they air a day or two later, I listen to my shows with a hypercritical ear. I want to satisfy the exact same performance criteria I would for a live show. Here's what I look for:

Am I present, front and center, and in your face? Am I maintaining eye contact and using that visualization to adrenalize my performance like an actor on stage? Am I topical, brief, bright, informative, entertaining, and compelling? Do I choose topics that matter — ones that go beyond water cooler bits and really engage my listener's emotions? Am I adding value to my listener's experience? Do I give enough *me* so my listener gets to know and like me, enough *you* so my listener feels like a star, and enough *station* so my listener associates all this good juice with my company? Am I connected to the time of day (no small challenge for a national show), the day of the week and the season of the year? How's my delivery? Not too fast, not too slow, conversational, clean, clear, crisp, well modulated like a good melody? And finally, the most important bullet: *am I tough to tune out?* And this is just a partial checklist!

I know there's a downside to this issue. If you're out of work now because you were replaced by a V-Tracker, I'm sorry about that. If you're young and just trying to break into the business, this trend makes things tougher for you, too. Where do you get started now that it's more economical to take a sat feed for overnights or weekends? And what about the ethical issues? I do have a problem with an announcer changing his name market by market and trying to

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convince you that he is literally broadcasting right now from the studio downtown. Any manager who tells his talent to sell this lie to the listeners is either asking for trouble or laughably shortsighted, or both. One newspaper expose is all it takes for the station's reputation to suffer. We've seen it happen already.

I admit there is a certain thrill watching someone making the best of, or the worst of, unplanned moments. Unpredictable stuff happens live, and that's a big part of the fun. This said, not only is Voice Tracking here to stay but also we'll see it increase as technology becomes more affordable and reliable. Our challenge is to take these tools and this trend and make something far better from it than we hear on the air today.

Every big idea goes through three evolutionary stages: 1) That's the stupidest thing I ever heard of. 2) That is *way* too (pick one): expensive, illegal, sacrilegious, outrageous. And finally, 3) I was behind this from the very beginning. Voice Tracking is one of those Big Ideas. Wherever you stand, doesn't it make sense to train our talent to excel in this new environment? Our biggest budget line is for personnel and benefits. Why put that kind of investment into people

and not train them to be even better performers? Our sales managers always budget for training because they know that when you train talented people, they become even more productive. It's time for programmers to take their tip.



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. Email john@sillimandodge.com or visit www.sillimandodge.com.



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