

# PROGRAMMING TO WIN

by John Silliman Dodge



## Interactive, Personalized, On-Demand

Inventors are keen observers. They notice how things work...in nature, science, business, human interaction...and they adapt, combine, modify, re-engineer and otherwise monkey around until they come up with a new solution, sometimes to a problem you didn't even know you had. A classic example is the tale of the dog and the cocklebur. After picking burrs off his retriever for the umpteenth time, some smart fellow had a light bulb moment. By design, the two elements, dog hair and burr tips are perfectly complimentary. The burrs end in hooks—just one cool way seeds hitch a ride—and the dog hair loops itself around the hooks. Bingo, we get Velcro.

I hope you think like an inventor. I hope you look at current phenomena in business, technology and society and wonder: how can I take what's happening all around me and adapt, modify, combine, re-engineer and otherwise monkey around until I come up with creative ideas to make my radio station stronger, more competitive, less vulnerable to attack, more must-have?

Now observe the iPod, Apple's little megaton bomb that has sold ten million units since 2001 and is poised to sell another ten million through the end of 2005. What do you think the light bulb moment was for Steve Jobs and his tech squad? Marry the portability of the Sony Walkman with the control of the computer in a too-cool design. Seems simple enough. The great ideas always are. But what made this particular gadget so successful? There are dozens of other portable digital music devices, most of them cheaper, some with even more features and functions than the iPod. But it doesn't matter. The iPod is the hit device. People line up to pay the premium. Why? Personality. While the other players are commodities, little beige boxes, the iPod has more perceived value. The iPod inspires loyalty. People even give these things nicknames. The other boxes have price as their defining feature. They think the way to the customer's heart is via the head. (Ten-in-a-row commercial free, anyone?) But Apple went straight for the heart and made price a non-issue.

Our stations fall into one of these two camps, too. We either have personality, we inspire loyalty, we lead with cool design, we generate word of mouth or we play songs and speak slogans that test well... and our listener loyalty lasts as long as the song. Which station are you? Are you "must-have" media or a common commodity, a button on the dial, a mere impulse away from tune-out? You know exactly where you are on this scale. So does your listener.

Look at your 21st century customer: Blackberry in one hand, iPod in the other, and a cell phone on the belt. Ask yourself the defining question: How does my radio station fit into this person's life? What itch do I scratch? What do I offer that he doesn't already get via these other channels? If you respond, "I'm local, I'm free, I'm convenient," give yourself a few points for hanging in there.

Local, convenient and free used to be enough when the listener's choices were few. Then ten years ago, Boom! The Internet turned everything on its head and ushered in *the single biggest sociological phenomenon that media has encountered to date*. The Web created an entirely new set of behaviors and expectations in the 12-34 demo, the younger end of which has never known a world without the Web. I don't care how much money we spend on self-congratulation programs, I challenge you to find a significant segment of this age group who says they learn about new music via the radio. It's all Web, file sharing, e-mail, chat and IM.

Let's call this new set of behaviors and expectations by a name Steve Jobs would appreciate: iPod. Only for our purposes, iPod stands for *Interactive, Personalized, and On-Demand*. This is the Web's secret sauce and the more we can adapt these three features to radio, the more successful our stations will become.

**Interactive.** Meaning not passive. I'm involved, I'm in control, I make a move and something changes. Traditional radio doesn't respond this way. We're pretty much a one-way channel. Sure, we test songs and we conduct focus groups and this feedback eventu-

ally makes its way into programming, but there's nothing immediate or personal or interactive about it, is there?

*What to do:* go beyond the phones and get listeners engaged through every available channel. E-mail and IM are great ways to offer instant and individual feedback. Mention this feedback in your regular on-air routine. You can't respond to everybody of course, but you can make a big deal about the folks that you do get to, and then make sure the entire audience knows about it. The result: greater perceived interactivity.

**Personalized.** Technology lets consumers personalize their experience. Notice how everything is My this and My that? The Web is all about me, me, and me. You don't expect ME to take the same stuff you shoot down the pipe for everyone else, do you? I want you to cater to me because I'm special.

*What to do:* Use your site to segment your audience into interest groups. Once you capture my name, address and affinities, you can communicate in a seemingly one-to-one fashion and send me an e-mail every time my favorite band is in the area, or when the new releases hit the streets, or when there's an event in my community, or when the station has a promotion that ties to my interests. Think of it as opt-in, direct mail marketing.

**On-Demand.** What, you thought only babies demanded instant gratification? Look at Comcast. They know that when you want a movie, you want it right now. You don't even want to get off the couch, much less put on your coat and drive to the Blockbuster. The big attraction to iPod is that you get exactly what you want when you want it. You don't wait for some program director to read your mind or your mood, you go get what you want for yourself. By contrast, we push programming out on our timetable to a passive group of listeners. Hopefully this coincides with what they want at the time but if not, well...what are you gonna do?

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## Q and A

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### What do you consider to be the toughest part of your job?

Having to pull an airshift every-day (laughs). Sometimes there's just not enough time in my day to do that too. However, I love being on the air. I've always been on the air all these years. And actually, doing the afternoon drive shift makes it the end of my long day, so I have something to look forward to. So, the answer to the question is really overseeing a staff of 16 people. Being able to manage them and keep them happy is most definitely the toughest part of my job.

### What advice do you have for a programmer who is contemplating taking a multiple station oversight position?

Again, it's a matter of dedication and passion; you have to have those two elements to make it work. You also have to realize that your salary might pay you to be there eight hours a day, but forget it, there's just no way you'll be there for eight hours a day, you'll probably be there for 12 or more. The bottom line is, if you love power and control, and the satisfaction of driving home everyday and listening to those stations knowing that that product sounds as good as it does because you put

the right people in the right places and you've made the right adjustments, and you hired the right voice talent, etc., well, you're going to be very successful. On the other hand, when the sh\*t hits the fan, understand that you are going to be the one called on the carpet, because they are your stations and you are responsible for your employees and everything that happens on those radio stations. Just like anything, there's good and bad.

### Would you seek out this kind of a position again in the future?

I wouldn't mind seeking out a

position like this down the road. For me, and I'm a little old school, I have to have the right people above me. I've been at other stations where I didn't have that. Maybe my GM wasn't as focused on the product as I was. I've also had some GMs that were just plain difficult to deal with, micro-managers who wanted their noses in everything including the music decisions. It takes the right GM and Sales Manager, for me, to enjoy what I'm doing. Currently, I know I'm in a rare situation. I'm left alone to succeed or fail on my own and I'm very thankful for that.

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*What to do:* Take every bit of cool audio you have...interviews, guest artist performances, great morning show bits, new music releases...and either stream it or make it downloadable on your Web site. Promote the site with the same energy that you promote the station because your web is no longer a separate channel; radio and Web should be joined at the hip, one mutually supportive, integrated machine.

These are just a few simple suggestions. The most important thing to do is stop freaking about the fact that iPods, Web channels, satellite radio, WiFi, cell phone song downloads and cranial implants have completely altered the playing field. Let's sniff the coffee and generate inventive,

creative solutions in response. Let's ask a lot of very fundamental questions, such as "What business are we in?" If Steve Jobs had said to his engineers, "We make computers, we're not in the music device business," things might have ended right there.

I would suggest that radio is *not* in the music business. It only seems that way. We're in the relationship business. (Repeat the mantra: *we're in the relationship business*.) We broker entertainment, information, communication, but we're really about winning and keeping loyalties. Our great advantage is familiarity (from the word *family*), which grows from the relationships that our air personalities have with their listeners. The more generic our personalities are, the less true personality they have and the less they seem like real friends and

family to the listeners. Remember this the next time you tell your people they talk too much. They might talk about the wrong things but they don't talk too much. We'll address that important issue in a future "Programming To Win" article.

Another bright thing to be optimistic about—we have *randomnicity*. A huge segment of our listeners want to be surprised, whether by new artists, new music, new information or new points of view. As cool as it is, your iPod won't surprise you because you're the one who stocked its little locker in the first place. So consider everything that you and your on-air team can do to provide regular "Aha!" moments, random occurrences, which surprise and stimulate your listeners, experiences that only humans can offer one another.

And while you're thinking about that, remember that 20 million iPod owners can't be wrong. Keep the acronym in mind and be relentless about inventing new ways for your station to be more Interactive, more Personalized, more On-Demand. It's a new way of thinking, certainly. But adapting creatively to change is what radio does best.

*A former creative production manager for KISS/San Antonio and both WROR and WBOS in Boston, John Silliman Dodge pioneered the modern commercial Classical format as PD at WCRB/Boston. Today he gives workshops and consults radio stations on announcer performance, digital strategies, marketing, production, and copywriting. John also announces for Sirius. Contact him at [john@sillimandodge.com](mailto:john@sillimandodge.com)*