

Old Dog, New Tricks: Staying Relevant in the Digital Era

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Introduction

Anders Dahlberg, Underwriting Director at WMUK – the local National Public Radio affiliate and classical music station located on the campus of Western Michigan University (WMU) – sighed heavily as he read yet another article about the demise of traditional radio. “It seems like all media are destined to migrate to the Internet,” he read. Yet, Arbitron (2013) stated in its “Public Radio Today 2012: How America Listens to Radio” report that even in an environment of increased media choices, time spent listening to public radio had remained stable. And, interestingly enough, the report noted that public radio’s popularity among younger audiences was starting to grow. Unfortunately, these positive trends at the national level did not match up with Dahlberg’s data. For the past several years WMUK experienced declining listenership and a drop in sponsorship (underwriting) revenues from local businesses. Anders knew that in order to remain relevant in the ever changing media environment, where other digital sources of news and entertainment were readily available, WMUK needed to attract new, younger listeners. This younger audience would become future contributing members who would, in turn, help to generate new sponsorship revenue.

Despite WMUK’s physical presence on campus, WMU students were, quite frankly, unaware WMUK existed. In fact, a recent survey among WMU students suggested that 77% of students did not listen to WMUK primarily because of that reason. Those few that did report listening to the station rarely accessed the station’s web site or interacted with the station via social media. Anders knew that the WMU college student population was an untapped opportunity. “Surely,” he thought, “there is some way to connect with students who are interested in what we are providing: high quality, local news and music, commercial-free.” The question was how could this be achieved given their limited marketing budget?

The Radio Industry

Terrestrial radio – the transmission of content or music through airwaves – a product in the maturity stage of the product life cycle, had been a fixture in homes, cars, workplaces and on the streets, beaches and elsewhere. In an average week, 92% of people aged 12 years or older are

reached by radio. However, according to an IBISWorld (IBIS) industry report (Crompton, 2013), the radio broadcasting industry had struggled to retain its relevance and audiences because of increased competition from digital media, in the form of online streaming radio, podcasts and portable music players. The report also pointed out that the industry suffered due to its limited interaction with listeners and its heavy reliance on advertising. Anders was all too aware of this latter factor. As the Underwriting Director, he had been responsible for obtaining corporate support for WMUK's programming. The public radio industry, which was heavily regulated by the FCC, had mandated that underwriting copy may not include qualitative, comparative, or promotional language. Calls to action, price information and inducements to buy or sell are not allowed either. These rules were intended to protect the non-commercial content of public broadcasting and to assure that underwriting would not compete with commercial radio advertising. According to Crompton (2013), the most important success factors for radio to remain relevant in the future included its: ability to adopt new technology, ability to attract local support/patronage, and access to quality DJs and radio personalities.

WMUK – The Station

A non-profit public radio station, WMUK was a charter member of National Public Radio (NPR) and Michigan Public Radio Network. Owned and operated by Western Michigan University, WMUK broadcasted at an effective radiated power of 50,000 watts at 102.1 FM. According to its website, the station's mission read: "To offer high quality programs and information to the Southwest Michigan area." The station started broadcasting 24 hours a day in both HD-1 and HD-2, providing high quality programs in a non-commercial environment. The station's geographical boundaries included north of Grand Rapids, east of Battle Creek, west to the shores of Lake Michigan, and south to just over the Indiana border. The station had averaged 44,000 listeners a week, with peak listening times of 8AM on weekdays, 9-10AM Saturdays, and 1-2PM on Sundays. Considered a News-Classical format, WMUK had been required to devote at least 30% of its airtime to news, public affairs or talk programming, or carry NPR newsmagazines. In addition, the station had been required to spend at least 30% of its Monday-Friday 6AM-7PM airtime to classical music, per its licensing agreement.

Twenty other News/Talk radio channels and seven other Classical radio stations provided terrestrial radio listeners a variety of options to satisfy their news and music needs. WMUK's main competitor had been Michigan Radio, the hub of NPR in Michigan, and a collective of three stations: WOUM (Ann Arbor), WVGR (Grand Rapids) and WFUM (Flint) which have provided service to most of the southern two-thirds of Michigan's lower peninsula. Together, Michigan Radio had 10 times the number of listeners as WMUK, and was much more active on social media platforms such as Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, Pinterest, YouTube and Instagram.

WMUK previous marketing efforts had included semi-annual pledge drives that had generated between \$160,000 and \$170,000 with a conversion for pledges to actual donations of 96%. Other efforts included weekly email blasts to any listener who signed up for the station newsletter and a very limited social media presence, which included a Facebook page and Twitter account. Although the station attended multiple events in the Southwest Michigan area, survey results indicated that most people did not recall seeing or coming into contact with WMUK at those events.

The Listeners

According to National Public Media's report titled, "This is NPR: Cross-Platform Audience Profiles" (2015), the NPR listener was described as notoriously affluent, educated, leading active lives, and likely very influential in their communities. It was reported that their interests range from politics to gardening, from travel to physical fitness. Luxury and self-improvement were also reportedly important to NPR listeners. In addition, it was stated that NPR listeners are more likely to shop at expensive clothing stores and own computers. Sixty percent (60%) of NPR listeners indicated using the World Wide Web in the past month (as compared to only 30% of the adult population in the U.S.). NPR listeners were also reported to be avid readers. Public radio listeners also more frequently reported being college graduates, professionals, investors, and having household incomes over \$75,000 than compared to the Average Adult Consumer.

Anders believed that WMUK listeners were similar to those of NPR. They were also highly educated, owned their homes, and had incomes over \$50,000. Most (89%) of WMUK's audience members reported not having children under the age of 12 in the household, while 54% of the audience members were 25-54 years of age and 73.7% were 35 years of age or older. The WMUK audience had historically been equally split between genders.

While WMUK had traditionally catered to an older, more affluent demographic, the station had been located right on the main campus of Western Michigan University since its inception. A full 25,000 students could be tuning in to WMUK for local news and music. WMU was home to seven different colleges, among them the College of Fine Arts, which was one of a kind in the state of Michigan. The College of Fine Arts consisted of the Frostic School of Art, Department of Dance, School of Music and Department of Theatre. All were nationally accredited. WMU students were exposed to more than 1,400 plays, concerts and exhibitions staged by the fine arts college. In addition, comedians, musicians and other popular entertainers had been invited to visit campus by the Campus Activities Board. WMU also was the home to Miller Auditorium, the third largest theatre in Michigan, which presented numerous concerts, multimedia extravaganzas, Broadway shows, and internationally acclaimed performances of ballet, opera, music and dance.

The Challenge

Anders had come to the conclusion that WMUK's lack of resources in marketing and promotion were negatively impacting the station's success. There had never been an employee or department with the responsibility of marketing the station. He acknowledged that there might have been a time, a few years ago, when listeners expected little or no spending in the area of marketing in public radio, but that time had passed. Given the competition and the array of choices for listeners today, marketing needed to become a priority for WMUK.

The station had been tentative about exploring social media (Facebook and Twitter) and wasn't sure how to best utilize either outlet to its full potential. And, Anders didn't know if they should be on other social media, such as Instagram, YouTube or LinkedIn. Considering the marketing budget was small, Anders needed low-cost, yet impactful ways to reach out to the next generation of WMUK listeners.

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