

# The threshold of annoyance

I really don't like that awful scraping on one's teeth to clean them, but love the feeling of a freshly polished smile. And regular dental hygiene beats neglecting your teeth to the point where they have to be pulled.

This is where the discussion of spot load is going. Just like taking care to program commercials with as much attention to detail as we schedule music or design hourly clocks.

The discussion of spot load and its effect on the radio listening audience is ongoing. We struggle with the departure of audience during commercials as measured electronically. In recent months I've read research studies including an EKOS Media Research study from May 2010 entitled "What drives the success of a Greater Toronto area (GTA) Radio Station". The study asked respondents to assume they were general manager for a day and offer suggestions for making the station better. Eighty four percent offered at least one recommendation. Almost half (46%) suggested running fewer commercials. 36% said fewer interruptions (regardless of the type of interruption) would make their favourite station better.

A recent piece in *Ross on Radio* proclaims that a drastically reduced spot load is the new paradigm. Ross also believes that "most listeners still regard listening to commercials as fair trade for entertainment". He cites Pandora's successful

introduction of commercials and points out Slacker's constant research into the "threshold of annoyance" as one of the most important things that terrestrial broadcasters can research in the immediate future.

So until such time as we determine that magic number that represents balance between music and commercials we need to brush and floss a little, just like we do between visits to the dental hygienist. Here are a few ideas to get you started.

The first is the ability to integrate what your audience is thinking and talking about to blur the lines between entertainment and advertising. If it's hot and humid I'd sure like to know where to buy an air conditioner on sale and I'd listen to that information if it was in the context of a weather report. If the end of the month is looming, it's a busy time for moving companies and truck rentals so it would be a good time to book your mover now if you're moving next month. If today's UV index is high, the audience needs to know that it's time to put on your sunscreen. They'd also appreciate knowing it's on sale at the corner pharmacy.

This type of programming of commercials on the fly may seem ambitious, but you're probably doing a similar thing right now with your music. You program specific songs when it's raining, songs for hot and sunny weather and songs to celebrate the arrival of 5:00 o'clock on Friday after-



noon. So it can be done. It just requires a new way of thinking and a new level of flexibility and cooperation between sales, traffic, creative and production, programming and talent to pull it off.

You put songs back to back because they sound good together. Use the same strategy to schedule commercials. Classify them as hot, medium or cold. If something terribly "hot" or grating is scheduled first in the break, move it in favour of something that more closely mimics the programming you segue from. Adjust for tempo, and "hear" the log in your head before you finalize and print for the next day.

New commercial scheduling software allows you to sort based on a variety of criteria, including tempo and voice talent. If your voice pool is limited you want to avoid over-saturation by having one commercial after another, voiced by the same person. Practice voice separation, or make it unnecessary by accessing a broader pool of talent. Voice share with another market or budget for more freelance.

Try scheduling contesting elements in the middle of a break—put your "cue to call in and win" in between commercials. Or, create fictitious, funny and entertaining commercials to place within the stop set and award cash to the first listener who can distinguish between real commercials and the counterfeit ones.

These solutions may seem like painstaking attention to detail. Kind of like brushing and flossing. Better to attend to the care and feeding of entertaining commercial breaks day to day, than risk extracting them entirely. Your smile will be that much more engaging.

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