



The New Now

There was a time when hiring a program director was as simple as promoting the very best talent on your staff. Today's level of sophistication and competition, combined with the fiscal responsibility and financial pressure that face all operators, have raised the criteria by which a programmer is judged. Given the need for this new skill set, I took the opportunity to talk with some of the leading programmers in our industry. Their responses provide insight as to where the content side of our business is going.

Given that radio is just another receiver today and the product is delivered to everything from iPhones to thumb drives, does it require a different set of skills to be a programmer?

Chris Oliviero, EVP of programming at CBS Radio, leads off the discussion. "We need to be aware of what the audience's expectation is for each of these platforms — it is not one-size-fits-all anymore," he says. "Everything from the length of the content, to the threshold for commercial interruptions, to pushing the envelope on standards and practices, and even potentially making sure the content not only plays to the ear but also to the eye, now needs to be considered.

"These are just some of the areas that programmers need to be cognizant of in relation to the platform or stage that the content is performing on, since consumers approach each of these with a certain built-in expectation level. The worst thing we can do is not minimally deliver on those basic



Scott Mahalick



Jeff McCarthy

expectations. The age-old philosophy in entertainment still applies: Read the room and know your audience."

Scott G. Mahalick, EVP of programming at Alpha Media, adds, "I think it requires a contemporary programmer who embraces all of these things. You need to be fluid in having an understanding of how all these things connect, and how they connect with the audience. Radio is the original social media. Radio is always a one-on-one medium, and this gives us a way to be hyper-interactive."

Expanding on that theme is Cumulus Media SVP/ Programming Mike McVay; he says, "Some new skills, combined with tried-and-true skills, are required to be a successful programmer today. Music — or talk — programming knowledge, creativity, organizational skills, people skills, marketing abilities, and a working knowledge of the digital space are important attributes for a programmer today. They need to understand how Nielsen works, have an understanding of research, and be prepared to throw out 'The way we used to do it' thinking. We need new perspectives to keep growing and evolving."

Coming at it from another point of view is Jeff McCarthy, VP of programming at Midwest Communications. "Not so much a different set of skills is needed," he points out, "but rather a greater knowledge of the delivery system. More options mean more opportunities, and the better you understand those options, the greater your advantage."

We continually hear that not only is it hard to find great talent, but finding talent at any level is harder than it was in the past. Recruiting programmers is becoming a greater focus for many broadcasters, and it's even more difficult than finding strong personalities. Internet streams and college programs are being used as a resource, but are we still talking about limited options?

"We have poisoned the farm system and field," Mahalick says. "We don't have new young people who look at radio as an exciting place to be. To the degree of having talent, we have scoped the size of that down. We had thousands of acres, and now we have one square block. We have to grow our own.

"In our company, when we recruit, we look at good music PDs, those who understand great imaging and production, and we look for desire. They need to be good at management. When we find these individuals, and if they have a propensity to want to program, we take them under our wing and we develop them. We mentor in every position within the company."

McVay adds, "There are still very good talent and programmers out there. You have to look for them. Small-market stations, online, college radio, broadcast schools, club DJs, and intern programs — these are proving to be great sources for new talent. I recruit almost constantly, and I am encouraged by the amount of talent available. I started on a carrier-current radio station in my parents' attic. Today that outlet is the Internet. It provides repetition. It's the radio version of a football quarterback throwing a ball through a swinging tire hanging on a tree in their backyard. We, as employers, need to look more closely for the diamonds inside of our companies."

McCarthy, who competes with the largest companies in the industry, is recognized as having very good talent on his radio stations. But there are "limited options," he says.



“There are some tremendous college programs, such as the Keller Media Institute, which is organized by consultant Dan Vallie. But we are only scratching the surface. The industry needs to invest more in training and education of talent and management.”

Several years ago, everyone seemed to be focusing on narrowcasting and creating niche products. This was probably because of the number of radio stations, online channels, and satellite radio channels, all competing for the same audience. Given the finances of working within a large radio group, is there still a value to narrowcasting, or are the demands such that everyone has to focus broadly to get the largest audience available and generate revenue?

Mahalick says, “Narrowcasting can help expand the brand and be an additional way to market to and reach people; it may have occasions for more potential and more usage.”

“As mentioned earlier,” Oliviero says, “one of the most important changes in the mindset of a modern programmer needs to be a broadening of what types of content we should be populating all these platforms with. We no longer are just broadcasters, we are now also narrowcasters. To me, this is a huge relief and opportunity, actually, since we are no longer tethered by the pressure of just having to find mass-appeal smash hits. We can now go beyond FM and AM, where we can delve into content that might not necessarily attract the largest audience but is still commercially and artistically viable. To me, this is where audio on demand — podcasting, especially — has untapped potential.”

McVay notes, “My boss says that the part of niche broadcasting he likes is the part that gets adults 25-54. So, no, we aren’t fond of niches for our biggest signals. To be successful in the ratings, you need a big cume. You need to be mass-appeal. If you are playing a ratings game, bigger is better.”

McCarthy points out, “With more delivery options come more programming opportunities. One of the biggest arguments of our business is the sameness and predictability of formats. Financial demands will restrict some of the forward progression, but those who embrace it will have the opportunity to create the next great format.”

Twenty years ago, there were great competitive advantages and a good deal of secrecy. Today the Internet and tools that monitor your every move are available to anyone with a checkbook. How do you continue to have an advantage over competitors when so much of what is programmed is available to the competition?

Oliviero says, “There is only one thing left that is truly theft-proof nowadays, and that is a real, live compelling human talent. All your bells and whistles and tactics are to a degree ‘stealable’ in an industry where copycats are a sincere form of flattery! But as long as cloning is not perfected, the world-class personality is your ultimate, unduplicatable line of defense. And besides worrying about cloning, make sure you have a locked-down contract with said talent!”

“That’s what separates the average from the great compelling content and programming,” Mahalick says. “I would argue content is more valuable today. You have to be extraordinary to make a difference. We all have access to the same research. We are about live and local as a company, and that allows us to reach audience, and gives us a superior advantage.”

But McVay observes, “It’s more than just being live and local. It’s about being entertaining and connecting. That’s what the audience cares the most about. The origination of the talent is geographic, that’s all. We have some amazing local live talent. We have some terrific nationally syndicated talent, too. You have to have every available tool and use them to your advantage. A stronger sense of urgency is also required as the element of surprise has been minimized.”

McCarthy believes that “it really comes down to execution of the plan and understanding the goal.” He says, “When the goal is fuzzy, all creativity is lost. It’s never been too difficult to figure out the competition’s strategic plan, but the greatest plans, poorly executed, will almost always fail. Unfortunately, the bigger enemy is spreading the programmers too thin and not allowing them to focus on the major goal — or, in some cases, handcuffing the programmer and not allowing them to adjust properly to the competitive situation. The



Mike McVay



Chris Oliviero

access to more information is a wonderful tool, but it still boils down to what you and only you can control.”

For most of us, the way we manage talent has changed over the last decade. What about programmers?

“I believe the value of a great programmer has increased,” says McVay. “We have focused on hiring programmers with successful track records, and we are allowing them to do their jobs. The women and men who program in our company are adults, and we are treating them with the respect they deserve.”

McCarthy notes, “We’ve added a large amount of additional tools to the programmer, such as social media, websites, streams, and more. The net is substantially wider than before, so more time must be spent to ensure those areas are being covered. What hasn’t changed is making sure the programmer is dedicated to the content of the station. With the additional tools, we cannot ignore content.”

These perspectives point to a programmer wjw can combine the science and art aspects of the platform, be managerially responsible, and have a more global vision than perhaps their predecessors did. Looking for talent in unconventional places and being patient in developing that talent appears to be a necessary trait for today’s PD. But one thing for sure, as always, is that nothing is for sure. ■■■

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