

What radio should learn from reality TV

 By Daryl Ilbury: @darylilbury

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There's a special place in my life reserved for reality TV; it's nestled between a visit to the glove doctor and watching a bubble of mucus pop out the nose of a grubby toddler. But the fact remains that there is something it can teach radio - an industry currently grappling to find its footing.

Most viewers most probably think of reality TV as a relatively new phenomenon and would point to Big Brother as its genesis; however it is almost as old as TV programming itself - think of Candid Camera, which dates back to the late 1940s.

Dates back to ancient Rome

In fact, the concept of placing real people (as opposed to actors) into compromising, unscripted situations for the entertainment of a viewing public dates back to ancient Rome and the era of mass executions to placate a disenchanted populace. Of course, in those days you had to be there to really appreciate it! All reality TV did was to project the enjoyment of the *schadenfreude* of the unfortunate into our living rooms.

But what Big Brother did do was introduce an element of reality TV that is shaping the strategy of programming in the realm of electronic media - something that major players in radio seem reluctant to realise.

Whether we watch over the shoulders of would-be 'masterchefs' battling each other to produce the perfect bolognaise, computer programmers attempting to woo a single beauty queen, or young business types stabbing each other for the satisfaction of a man with a wispy hairpiece, most reality TV shows combine the two elements of the spectacles that entertained the masses of ancient Rome: voyeurism and combat.

Really captured the imagination

The fact is, most of these shows are programming supuration, designed to swell the schedules of media empires; but there's a hardened crust of reality TV programmes that has really captured the imagination of the viewer and dominated primetime scheduling. These include the ilk of Idols, Strictly Come Dancing, Survivor and [Insert country's name here]'s Got Talent. This is because they contain an extra element in the programming design; and it is *this* that radio needs to wake up to.

Worked it out yet? In every one of those reality TV shows, the consumer has a powerful voice in the continued or ultimate outcome of the content.

Of course, again, this concept is not new in the arena (excuse the pun) of reality entertainment. Audiences at the Colosseum were often allowed to dictate the gory outcome of a tussle between gladiators simply by displaying an inverted thumb (my former Latin teacher insisted that an inverted thumb was actually a call for clemency).

Consumer input virtually non-existent

Until relatively recently, any consumer input into the outcome of a TV show was virtually non-existent, and was limited to audience research that could, maybe, in secret and only after a couple of months, bring a tired TV show to its end.

But now, by simply thumbing a couple of numbers into a mobile phone, a consumer has an almost immediate say in who emerges the victor in a televised talent show. Tap the number in today, and tomorrow they win. The impact is direct, and it's quick.

More importantly, such a programming strategy polarises, but retains, its audience. The audience is divided into alliances that support different players. Their passion is fired and becomes increasingly committed as the competition intensifies. Social networking groups are created and social media is abuzz with people spreading the word. The consumers become fervent brand advocates.

Has radio learned?

So what has radio learned from this? Not much, it seems.

Think of the stations you listen to. What degree of their content do you and your fellow listeners openly and actively shape? Do you get the sense that they are listening to you? Do you hear sufficient respect for the opinion of those listening? Do you get the impression that the station is evolving or improving?

The reality is (and again, pun intended) a lot of radio, especially that dominated by music, is still clenching onto a '90s programming strategy where the stations are the chief determiners of content, shaped in part by research done in secrecy. Decisions about programming are made based on data collected over months, which is then analyzed, off-air, in offices; and, if there's something all my years in qualitative research analysis taught me, it's that research can often be used to justify diverse hypotheses.

Doesn't involve active listener

More importantly, such research does not involve the active listener. At best they may tick a box, but they don't hear any causal effect on the radio. There's no excitement in the process. Also, they don't feel part of the station, so their commitment to its brand is open to sway.

If there's something radio can learn from reality TV, it is this: as radio markets become increasingly competitive, and a democratised electronic media is giving a voice to consumers, these consumers are demanding accountability and representation in the stations they listen to. They want to be part of programming. They want to hear their voice, literally and figuratively, on the radio.

The question is: are the stations listening to them?

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