

Radio programming consultants. Why?



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The last person who called me a programming consultant almost walked away with a bloody nose. I felt like a psychologist who had just been referred to as a life coach. I then realised that the person looking at me with wide eyes, their face fixed with shock at my reaction, had fallen under the spell of these supposed radio gurus.

In my 20-odd years in radio I've rubbed shoulders with a number of programming consultants, both at stations I've worked for and stations I've worked with; and I've always wondered what it is that they actually do.

Let me rephrase that, I know what they do; I just wish I knew *why* they have to do it.

Undermine programme manager's credibility

What they do is undermine the credibility of a station's programme manager, and that is not a good thing.

If, say, a programme manager worked isolated from other staff and felt happy glancing over their shoulder for affirmation from an external authority; then a programming consultant can provide value. In a radio context, this would mean the programme manager is head of an Internet radio station where presenters are either non-existent or simply relegated to recording voice links.

The reality is that a programme manager is a manager of people, specifically, creative and talented people; and as such is responsible for ensuring what I call the 4Ds in their creative talent: discipline, drive, direction and differentiation. Without discipline, there is no structure; without drive, there's no passion; without direction, there's no strategy or plan; and without differentiation, there's no creative energy or richness in the lineup.

Any programme manager that cannot provide this isn't fit for the job; and when a programming consultant is called in, the subtle but savage subtext broadcast to the rest of the staff is that the programme manager can't do the job. The station staff then senses a weakness and the rot sets in.

Can't know everything

Now, I know what you're thinking: the programme manager can't know everything. Obviously; and there are times when they need the input from external authorities; but these should always be accountable to the programme manager, not the other way round. There's a big difference between a programme manager calling in someone to guide them with a new programming software programme, and having to call someone in because the programme manager doesn't know how to

use the current programming software.

But what if the programme manager needs help incorporating a programming strategy into a broader, corporate, perspective? That's what the CEO is for, and if the two of them can't sort that out, they should both be kicked out.

One argument for the use of programming consultants is that it's nice for the programme manager to bounce ideas off fellow programme-minded professionals. However, there are numerous international forums for that online, and most programme managers in this country are on friendly terms, and continually seek advice from each other.

Another argument for programming consultants is that it's valuable to receive authoritative opinion from leading programming professionals operating in other markets (the flavour of the moment seems to be Australia).

Empowering

No, that provides the insight of one person. It's more valuable for the station (and a hell of a lot cheaper!) to send a programme manager to international radio conferences where they can gather insight from numerous programming professionals operating in diverse (and common) radio markets. A station that does this empowers a programme manager; placing them under the scrutiny of someone else simply undermines them.

And then there's the matter of the value of the 'insight', and the position of a programming consultant in the station's pecking order.

One music station programme manager I knew, who had officiated over quite dramatic successive quarterly audience slides, explained to me that their new programming consultant had identified the reason for the continued audience loss: the station was coming out of the news on the hour with an incorrect tempo song! I remember thinking "I know why the station is losing audience, and I'm looking at it."

A talk radio station programme manager I worked with said that, before any programme changes could take place, they had to be cleared with the station's programming consultant, who was based in Australia. The question begs who's running the station? The management, or some guy living thousands of kilometres away from the station's target audience and whose allegiance is diluted across a number of different radio stations?

Still those with keen eye for trends, detail

It is unfair to paint all programming consultants with the same brush. There are those who still have a passion for radio and a keen eye for trends and detail. But there are also those I wouldn't trust to do a time-check properly.

But it seems they are all fêted by stations with no faith - rightly or wrongly - in their programme managers and, as such, programme consultants are simply taking advantage of failures in the system. And that's what we should really be worried about.

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