

WORKING WITH CREATIVE DEVIANTS

Advice for morning-show producers

By Pam Baker

Sales & Marketing Editor
pambaker@ronline.com



PAM
BAKER

Being a producer can be the most rewarding experience — but, at times, it can also be a royal pain. In my career I've been a producer for several local and syndicated shows. I loved my time as a producer (though I could do without getting up at 3:30am), and I especially enjoyed the jubilation when our team efforts were recognized on Arbitron ratings report days.

A former colleague and a good friend, **Frank Murphy** is a radio host, morning-show consultant and former producer of the syndicated *Mark & Brian Show* (based at KLOS/Los Angeles), *Kevin & Bean* (KROQ/Los Angeles), Jay Thomas (formerly of KPWR/Los Angeles) and *Don & Mike* (WAVA/Washington). For this week's Air Personalities theme issue, I wanted to conduct a little Q&A role-playing with Murphy on some of the problems producers might face. (Mark, Bean, Mike, others — don't worry: We never encountered these situations with you!)

R&R: *It's very difficult to motivate our morning team. They never want to plan the next day's show. They say they'd rather "wing it," but the lack of planning sounds like a lack of planning. What can I do?*

FM: The best morning shows have more material than they can use. It's best to overprepare. You can still wing it in reaction to a fresh news story or a topic that comes up during the show, but you can't guarantee that news will happen on your schedule. At KROQ, Kevin & Bean [Kevin Ryder and Gene "Bean" Baxter] have disciplined themselves to fill a grid with what they are going to do in every segment for the next day's show.

Here's what you can do: Start by creating a blank grid — if you're in Microsoft Word, click on "Table," then "Insert," then choose the number of columns and rows. Fill in your daily and weekly benchmarks, then take the grid to the talent and ask them how they plan to fill the remaining spaces. You can suggest topics or bits to them. Fill in as many spaces as you can. If they still want to wing it, write their names in the empty spaces. Make them take responsibility for filling the time. Give copies to everyone on the show and maybe the PD.

R&R: *How can I tactfully tell one of the morning guys that his new character bit isn't funny or that a joke doesn't work? He has a huge ego and thinks everything he creates is brilliant. Help!*

FM: In my experience, the talent with the biggest ego is often hiding his or her insecurity. The bigger the ego, the more insecure the person. If you criticize someone who is that insecure, they can't take it. Instead, heap praise on something else they did that actually was funny or brilliant. The talent will keep trying to get positive reinforcement and will stop

doing material that gets no reaction. When he asks you about his new (unfunny) character bit, you can say that you prefer another one that is funny. But you also have to keep encouraging him to create new material, or you'll be stuck in a rut with the same old characters forever.

R&R: *One of our morning guys likes to party every night. In the morning he's hung over, and it takes at least an hour for him to wake up and get with the program. His partner won't confront him but complains to me constantly. What should I do?*

FM: This type of criticism needs to come from an equal, like his partner, or a superior, the program director, and not from the producer, who is a subordinate. Talk to the sober partner first and tell him that he needs to address the situation with his hung-over partner one on one. If he refuses, then suggest that you both ask the program director to have a "come to Jesus" meeting with the party boy.



FRANK
MURPHY

R&R: *Our female co-host is always late. We're on-air at 5:30am, but she runs in every morning at around 5:45, and it causes all kinds of distractions. She has a different excuse every day: "My kid was throwing up," "I spilled coffee on my shirt," "I ran out of gas," "The alarm didn't go off." Your advice?*

FM: This is similar to the problem with the drunken partner. The criticism should come from an equal or above. Also, everyone on the show should make it clear that they don't care what the reason is for her lateness. Go ahead and start the show without her at 5:30. If you all act like you can function fine without her, she'll get the message real fast. You could also suggest that the tardy co-host be given some responsibility before the show. Perhaps she can print out the listener e-mail or the show-prep sheets. The co-host needs to know that her duties begin at 5am, not 5:30. That way, if she's still 15 minutes late, it's only 5:15.

R&R: *Neither member of our morning team will spend time learning about pop culture. They don't go see the latest movies, refuse to watch Access Hollywood and don't read entertainment magazines. They sound like fools when listeners call in asking questions about a particular movie or TV show or about celebrities, and they end up putting me on the air to explain what Legally Blonde is about or what's happening with celebrities. Isn't keeping up with pop culture part of their job?*

FM: Who are these idiots? It sounds like they're doing a good job of making you more valuable and making themselves obsolete. Make sure that you'll still have a job when they get fired.

Seriously, one of the keys to a successful radio show is to talk about what your listeners already care about. You need to know what movies, TV shows and magazines they prefer. You need to watch what they

watch and read what they read. Unfortunately, many radio personalities lose touch with what the audience likes. The privilege of hosting a radio show comes with the responsibility to do show prep and to know what's going on in the minds of your listeners.

Pop culture provides a never-ending stream of topics and things to make fun of. If you ignore all that material, your show will get stale fast. Imagine how ridiculous it would sound to talk only about black-and-white TV shows, movies released more than 25 years ago and long-dead rock stars.

The members of KROQ's *Kevin & Bean* have homework assignments. Among other things, Bean watches all the awards shows, [show member] Ralph Garman watches all the reality shows, and Kevin watches sporting events. They bring in audio clips from the shows they watch. They have always seen all the latest movies, and they read lots of magazines and newspapers. On top of all that, they subscribe to Ross Brittain's show-prep sheet. Nothing gets by them.

R&R: *Our station hired a comedian to be the star of the new morning show. He's really funny onstage, but on the radio he isn't so good. He's always trying to jump in with a punch line. How can I get him to translate his stand-up into an entertaining radio show?*

FM: There is a fundamental difference between stand-up comedy and morning radio. Stand-up comedians generally talk at their audience rather than to them. Radio is an intimate medium; its listeners are usually alone. Stand-up comedy is public speaking. Your comedian is going to need to forget almost everything he knows about performing and learn how to communicate over the radio. Stand-up comedy is a cutthroat business. The comedians who have been successful on radio (like KKBT/Los Angeles' Steve Harvey) have learned that they don't have to have a punch line for everything and that they don't have to top other cast members. When anyone on Steve Harvey's radio show is funny or entertaining, Steve still gets the credit.

R&R: *Our PD is always telling us to "do a show more like The Tonight Show." I've watched Jay Leno, and I don't think his style works for radio. What do you think?*

FM: I think you are correct. Jay Leno's show follows the model for stand-up comedy. I believe morning radio should follow the model for improv comedy. Leno's huge staff writes hundreds of jokes that get whittled down into a monologue, and his show is only on for an hour a day. Morning radio shows are four or five times longer, and the staffs are only a fraction of the size of Leno's.

In stand-up comedy you constantly write new material and reduce it to a tight set for the stage. In improv comedy, you constantly expose yourself to pop-cultural references — in radio, that's show prep — then start with an audience suggestion or a news story and expand on it, getting funnier as you go. Tell your PD that I said he's wrong and that he should pay to send everyone on your show to an improv comedy class.

Frank Murphy can be reached at frankradio@aol.com, or visit his website at www.frankmurphy.com.