

PLAIN TALK ON A LOUSY ECONOMY

By Jim Russell

These are miserable tough times in every business ... and public broadcasting is far from being immune to the economic pain. Every day, it seems, brings news of small and large stations that are laying off staff. These are real human tragedies. We all know people who are affected.

With so much anguish around, it is hard to stay focused on strategic thinking. But we must or everything we have fought for and cared about in public broadcasting will vanish. The jungle will quickly grow back and it will be all-Rush Limbaugh-all-the-time.

At the local station level, it seems to me we public radio folks have two choices:

1. **Give up on local programming.** As the research experts have said, it is hardly ever done well enough to be successful anyway. So, if we choose to give up on localism, we simply ride the network programming, maybe do a few unambitious local breaks during M.E. and ATC and between NPR, PRI, APM, and PRX, cobble together enough imported shows to fill up the schedule. Being a local station reverts to operating a cable head-end, and your station sounds like everyone else's public radio. You can stream your signal on your web site ... www.publicradioclone.org.

There is only one other choice.

2. **Do local programming better than you have ever done it before.** Produce wonderful local programming and do it with absolutely clear goals and metrics of success, tremendous talent (look who is on the street), superb insight into your market, and economic efficiency. Be live or live-on-tape. Be topical. Be omnipresent – be there everywhere, every time your listeners turn around. Promote, promote, promote. Roll over and repeat your best programs throughout the schedule and on your HD channels if you can. Brand everything you produce up the wazoo, everywhere, all the time. Make your local programming hyper local, dealing with the real nitty gritty of what is going on in your community. Demonstrate again that local radio is vital and truly connective and interactive in a way that podcasting and the Internet can only dream of.

Not only is #2 more inspiring, but *it is destined to be more successful*. At a time when people are giving up left and right, it is your way of expressing continuing faith in the medium of radio and the commitment of your audience. Tell your audience, “We’re not giving up – we’re here for you. Now you be here for your public radio station too.”

The difference between the two is night and day in terms of air sound and appeal. But the biggest differences are behind the scenes. This kind of radio requires a real strategic plan. You need to know your mission and vision with real crispness -- why

you're doing what you're doing. You need to differentiate your strengths and weaknesses, and your sound from everybody else's ... which means you need to really listen to the other guys before you decide your sound. Once you have, you need to write a Bible of your own to remind you exactly how your unique sound is to be implemented, what is in and what is out.

More than anything, you need to think this through, commit to it, and have the discipline to stick with it.

If not, there are lots more layoffs coming. Those cloned radio stations of the future will only need one person – to reboot the computer when it goes haywire.