

## Programmer hones strategy for public radio

Deborah Caulfield Rybak, Star Tribune

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Jim Russell recently was named head of new-program development at American Public Media, the program-distribution arm of Minnesota Public Radio (MPR). Russell, creator of the enormously popular business show "Marketplace," joined MPR when it bought the Los Angeles-based program in 2000.

Since then, Russell has created and launched "Weekend America," a magazine-format news show that has been steadily picking up stations nationwide (it's now carried by more than 100) and recently acquired Target Corp. as its founding sponsor. APM also distributes about 20 programs to other public radio stations, including "A Prairie Home Companion," "Sound Money," "Speaking of Faith" and "The Splendid Table."

In a recent conversation, Russell talked about public radio, its challenges and how he wants APM's programming to meet them. Here are some excerpts:

**You created "Marketplace," the most popular broadcast business show ever. What is the secret of its success?**

One was timing, at the beginning of the transformation to a global economy. The other was that we picked the right audience.

At the beginning, someone suggested that we do a program for CEOs, to which we said, "Oh, that'll be great, if we got 'em all we'd have 500 listeners -- that's exciting." Instead, it became the business show for the rest of us, not a business show for businesspeople. It's our attitude that business can sometimes be funny, sometimes sad, sometimes foolish and yet remains important.

**What makes public-radio listeners different?**

It isn't money, and it isn't income.

Our audience distinguishes itself by education. It is phenomenally different from the audience at large, which to me is a fantastic gift. You can do any subject, and you can be cool and hip and modern in your thinking as long as you offer people an experience that is not only entertaining and enjoyable but educational and informative.

**What do you think about current public radio programming?**

As wonderful as public radio is, its most popular programs, [National Public Radio's] "All Things Considered" and "Morning Edition," were invented in the '70s and the '80s -- and it's the '05s! We can't just keep making those programs better and expect the audience to stay frozen in time. There needs to be a recognition that public radio can modernize and diversify its sound. That's what we're trying to do with "Weekend America" and other new programs.

**Why was it necessary to create your position?**

Minnesota Public Radio has really grown like Topsy for years and years and years. We needed to have more strategic thinking about which things MPR/APM was going to pursue in the national arena.

**What do you think of American Public Media's current slate of programs?**

Every single one of them is a gem; each one has a following. But now we need to ask ourselves: What connects them? What's the fiber that connects them? What is the shared sound, the shared approach, the shared vision? Frankly, when you listen to a National Public Radio program, you hear an NPR sound -- whether you like it or dislike it. My challenge is to develop a public radio sound that's different from NPR but compatible.

**Is it important that you be based in California?**

No. In fact, it's even a little odd. But I think that it's actually beneficial. It would be very easy for the company to become insular and insulated and to not have a lot of competing opinions. California is known for its creativity, for showbiz and performance and the arts. If you can combine Minnesota values and ideas with a Western point of view, you've got a very interesting soup there.

**Yet with those Minnesota roots and California creativity, one of your first new projects is a show based in Brooklyn called "The Corner," which features an African-American, a rarity on public radio.**

We're trying to invent a new way of talking to public-radio listeners and also to people who haven't been traditional public-radio listeners. James McBride is a successful journalist, author, composer and musician. He had this wonderful idea for a show set in one of those neighborhood stores on the corner where they sell everything and the people come in and tell stories and hang out. The musical accompaniment will be provided by people singing doo-wop a cappella. We're taping four pilot segments that will all appear as individual segments on "Weekend America." We'll see if we can round up the funding to do this on a continuing weekly basis.

**So if we listen to "Weekend America," will we get hints about new shows you might be tinkering with?**

Absolutely; it's a tryout stage.

**What are the buttons on your car-radio dial tuned to?**

Two of them are programmed to public radio. I have a rock oldies station and a country-western station. Then I have a channel with that lush, disgusting "music for lovers" music. On the AM dial I have two all-news stations. I've tried periodically to listen to some of the AM conservative talk shows because they are such a fascinating phenomenon -- but they make me drive into telephone poles.

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