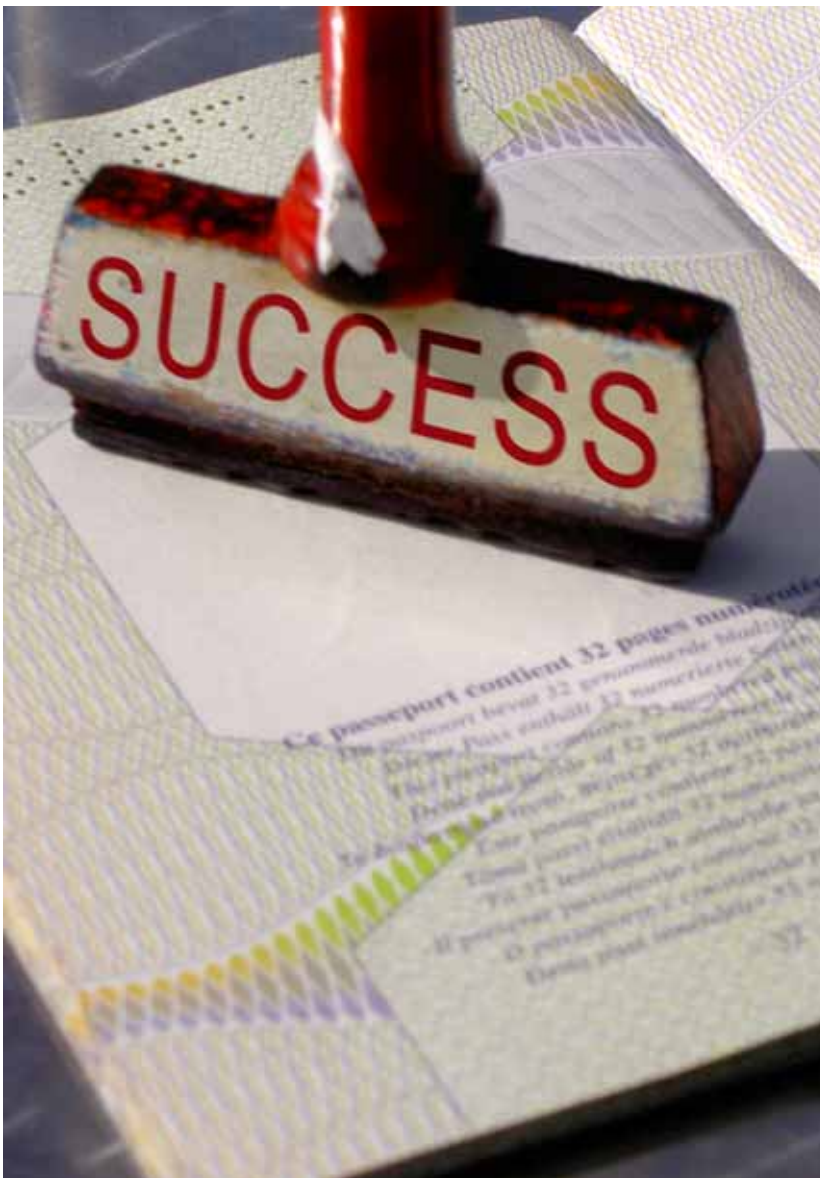


Station Sound
Philip Hilton, Consultant



Station

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Consultant



You can put the greatest programmes on the radio but never have an impact if your station has no unique, consistent sound. If the station or programme has no on-air image that people can relate to, connect with or recognize, how will listeners differentiate the station from the competition and, more importantly, how is it possible to achieve good ratings?

Glue

Station sound is a marriage between the many elements that make up the output on the station's broadcasts, it is the glue that holds everything that is transmitted together giving a 'joined up' radio, on-air consistency that says what the station is even before the presenters have identified the station, played a jingle or talked up a show. It's a ratings winner that's commonly overlooked.

Each of the ten steps are prioritized differently to apply to whatever format the station operates, but the basis of the ten steps applies whether it is a full service, music station, talk, news, religious, shopping or international channel. The interpretation is dependent on the programmer. Give six chefs the same recipe and they'll produce six different cakes! Whatever the station's format and

Sound

Ten steps to 'joined up' broadcasting

place in the market (and there's no reason to say that a small market radio station should sound small) and providing that you want to provide your listeners with the best product you can, introducing these ten steps will go a long way towards extending listening hours, reach, share and, of course, revenue.

1)

Back to basics. Start to be more consistent with your clock hours.

Set up news, commercials and set times for promo trailers, weather, travel bulletins and what's on diary items/listings in the same order and at the same time each hour. Listeners will get to know the station's pattern of 'uniquely consistent behaviour', e.g. travel news follows your weather bulletin.

2)

Be consistent in the way you sell your station.

Tie the printed logo, registered diary/rating name and on-air identification together in the same way. If the station is called HITS 100, keep it as such, at all times and with no deviation. Often I have heard stations (using the example) ident themselves as HITS Radio, FM 100, Music 100, Radio Hits, etc. The main link with a ratings return is the effort put in on the on-air identification: decide on one name and keep to it.

3) Manage sub-brands, ally news travel and weather with the main station name.

Once the main, on-air station identification has been established in the market, carry it through, e.g. HITS 100 News, HITS 100 Weather, HITS 100 Travel, HITS 100 Sport, and so on.

Take care when using programme titles as part of your schedule, for example "You're listening to Weekend Tonight".

It's in everyone's interest to promote the radio station name, then the personalities' name in that order. Programme names will weaken the on-air brand; use them at your peril.

4) Achieve cut by the station's voice.

Station personality can be as outgoing or discreet as the format and desired place in the market dictates. Start with a voice that reflects or complements the target age group in terms of male/female on-air voice balance or age group. Think about the 'image' the chosen voice gives when he/she reads the logo/positioning statement. Fully utilize the voice on ID's, sweepers and station promos. If the voice can be integrated into the phone system to greet people then this should be done.

5) Raising awareness through other media.

Promoting the station through other media is often a costly investment so consistency is the key. It is essential that there is no deviation from the station's logo and livery: staff need to be spotted quickly when on remote/outside broadcasts. If, for example, television is the medium that is used then it should be remembered that a large percentage of the station's listeners will often not know what the mid-morning presenter looks like; the illusion of radio should not be spoilt. It is important to get across the station's unique selling point through creativity, challenging the brief, and the selective use of presenters and avoiding at all costs shots of presenters adjusting headphones in the studio!

6) Using the house news style.

In news bulletins always think about the listener and make every story relevant to them. If it's a big story, don't be afraid to lead the bulletin with audio. When interviewees are clipped or there are big hitters in the bulletin, include the use of the station name whenever possible. For example, "Speaking on Hits 100 Tony Blair said..." or "Speaking to Hits 100 Tony Blair said...". If regular contributors are used for travel and weather information, add them to the pool of available station people and call on them for comments when stories crop up in their field of expertise. Include the broadcast area in weather bulletins but rather than say, "The weather for my town and Broadshire..." something like, "It'll be mainly dry across my town and Broadshire this evening..." will have more of a direct reference and connection with listeners.

7) Self-promotion on the station.

If the listening hours average at about 10 per week, that means the average listener can tune in for just under 1.5 hours per day. What else they hear about during that time might encourage them to listen longer or tune in at another time. Use fixed slots to run promotional campaigns and concentrate on monthly promotional priorities. If it's not possible to put together built promos every time, talk up sheets with the bare detail and ad libbed by the presenter are a great substitute.

8) Keeping your on-air sound familiar.

If the station is known for news, weather and travel, keep it that way and present it in that order. Listeners like consistency especially when commuting; they like to know that when the half past headlines come on, that it is half past the hour, even without a time check and that the weather will follow those headlines if that's the usual case. Chances are listeners could time their journey by landmarks arrived at while hearing key programme points and junctions used in the station's routine. Use standard out cues on travel, weather and news bulletins.

9) Remember on-air identity.

Some sort of station identification across its output is key for recognition and memorability. Jingles, sweepers and voice-overs play a big part in showcasing the station's personality and setting the mood in the first place. They are the biggest building blocks in creating the station's sound. Fashion and the marketplace often dictate what's currently popular. Avoid jingles for everything; presenters will probably want a jingle for every feature and event that is broadcast. The likelihood is that only a few will be played, favourites will begin to show and often at the same time each day if they are incorporated into a built playout system running order. Be predictable!

10) Write a sound style guide for your staff.

In order to benefit from utilizing the previous nine points, it's essential that the house style is recorded and made available to station staff. Write a station house style guide incorporating the above pointers interpreted correctly for the station's sound. Publish it as a freely available booklet that shows pride and commitment, and the level of importance of such a publication. That way it will have much more impact and will be a useful training manual for new staff and ensure that existing staff work in and around the style or sound that has been created.

These points are a glue to bind the individual aspects of the station's output into a clear, focussed, consistent sounding radio station that can make the smallest station sound big, joined up and connected. Utilize each of the points as you see fit for your format.

Philip Hilton is a radio consultant specializing in station sound. Since 1985 he has been involved as a presenter and producer in commercial and BBC radio. Starting in Dublin working with an American programme director on Sunshine 101, he has also presented on the BBC's top rated local station BBC Radio Merseyside, set up the commercial station Dune FM in his home town of Southport and played a key role in the BBC's radio coverage of the Commonwealth Games on BBC 2002 in Manchester. Prior to setting up his consultancy, Philip spent six years as part of a BBC Radio troubleshooting team with responsibility for building and maintaining station sound, ID commissioning and managing and working with radio station staff to improve ratings. As a promo/commercial producer, Philip has won several awards for his work: The Vox Commercial advertising awards, New York Radio Awards, Promax advertising awards.

Philip Hilton is currently working with BBC Radio Cornwall on a station sound project.

*Philip Hilton: mail@philhilton.co.uk,
tel. +44 7889 519623
www.philhilton.co.uk*