

## The Human Side of Radio

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## The Human Side of Radio

### Abstract

I know a number of extension broadcasters who believe that dispensing subject matter is the major purpose for their radio programs.

# The Human Side of Radio\*

Foster Mullenax

I KNOW A NUMBER of extension broadcasters who believe that dispensing subject matter is the major purpose for their radio programs. Many of my colleagues believe that getting the tape on the air is ample proof that subject matter has been delivered to those needing it. The attitude, “They air my stuff, that’s enough,” is causing a lot of good broadcasters’ efforts to be wasted.

In fact, commercial broadcasters, except for radio farm directors, often plead ignorance to what extension programs should be like. They feel that extension people know best what to air. Yet when asked to level with us—to judge the AAACE contest entries or to seriously discuss the best way to reach people on their station—they say extension programs are “cold with a general lack of personal warmth.” This is borne out by the judges of Class X, Radio Features (regular feature) in the 1972 AAACE Critique and Awards Contest. Out of 27 entries, only one earned a blue ribbon.

The judges were professional commercial broadcasters. They said, “There seemed to be a lack of drive, perhaps a lack of knowledge as to what constitutes good programming, and maybe lack of time to properly program a radio show. Innovativeness and creativeness, for the most part, were lacking.”

“Lack of drive” might well be due to a lot going out, but nothing coming back. Our programs may not be causing people to talk about that university radio show they heard. The broadcaster possibly never gets calls before breakfast, after supper, or even at

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\*This talk was presented by Mr. Mullenax at the 1972 AAACE meeting, Tucson, Arizona. The title is taken from Agrisearch, April 1956—Research Report of National Project in Agricultural Communications.

the office about some program he did. Letters, calls and even telephone operators saying, "Oh! I know you, I've heard you on the radio," can create some drive. He knows then that people are listening.

What about the "lack of knowledge as to what constitutes good programming." This gets right at the heart of what those who fight for audiences and try to keep them have to say to us. Here's where a broadcaster's philosophy shows through. If you believe that subject matter can be cast out over the air waves without being humanized, your programs will at best be dull and uninteresting. To interview the subject matter specialist is not necessarily the answer. Regardless of how articulate the specialist, too often it's subject matter that is being dispensed. And the authority still is not enough to cause a lot of people to listen to the message. In spite of its value, the approach just sounds educational.

This is not to say that all subject matter interviews should be discontinued. Rather, as one extension broadcaster said, it's better to have the specialist locate a good user of his subject matter who can be interviewed in his place. Then instead of depending on canned sound effects or having none at all, you're recording on the spot where things are happening.

The successful extension broadcaster takes his listeners somewhere, for he goes with recorder out among the people. He looks for interesting human stories that mean something to a lot of potential listeners. In fact, the broadcaster who continually hustles specialists into his radio studio for interviews becomes so busy at it he never can get out to know people for whom broadcasts are intended.

Of course, if your major mission is to try to teach listeners, you cannot possibly free yourself to go the route of humanized radio. But if you believe that your mission first is to help people be aware of problems and progress and that you have faith in the many other methods in use to help people solve problems, you'll only cut out as your task the job of doing everything possible to cause listeners to feel good about you, your institution, and its fine work. If you are concerned about causing people to be inter-



ested in information that you are giving them, you must humanize your programs.

The haunting question the extension broadcaster has to answer daily is: Why am I doing this radio program? If the answer is that it's to reach people, then how you package your message is already determined. It must live and breathe to cause casual listeners to hear it. For example, if you have determined that there is need to do programs about corn, who are you going to do them for? Is it for corn producers needing the information? Is it information the specialist thinks corn producers should have? Are there other methods being used to get that information to the corn producers? How can you get them to be sure to listen when it's broadcast? How can you get them to remember when they do listen? And possibly, how can you get them to talk about what they hear so others who didn't listen will get the word? Corn producers just may be so highly motivated they'll listen to anything on corn. It's their major source of income.

On the other hand corn producers possibly don't differ too much from other normal human beings. They too are busy and often listen only casually. They can enjoy a lively musical number. They have normal and even abnormal distractions like the rest of us. I'll bet you they know about Alka Seltzer and, "I can't believe I ate the whole thing." Why do they remember it? It's a humanized message. They didn't have a scientist telling them they should take Alka Seltzer to relieve their stomachs of the "whole thing." They learned it from another overeater, or another corn farmer.

All of this is to say that to humanize an information broadcast may require a trip to a cornfield where you say, "I'm here in an 80-acre corn field about three miles north of Indianola. John Corncob has planted this year's crop in sod—John, you didn't plow the ground and with corn knee high, you still aren't cultivating. What made you decide to try the no-tillage method? How do you feel about the result? What would you do differently next time? Why?"

Any number of things could embellish this on-the-spot report. You could be doing the interview as you drive through the field in your car or the farmer's pickup truck. Outside are the natural field

sounds—birds, insects, passing highway traffic, wind, planes overhead, farm equipment working nearby—sounds you and he make walking through the field, etc. This is showmanship, the real world going on tape that very few other broadcasters have reason to get. It makes your radio show stack a mile higher than most to create interest. You have taken your listener somewhere and he enjoys it. You humanized your radio program.

Second best is to credit real or imagined people with information on your show. For example, “I know a man who swore he’d never chance his crop of corn by planting right in the sod.” Or, “Harry Harper at Centerville tried no-tillage corn last year on only five acres. This year he went entirely to no-tillage and planted 80 acres.”

There’s no question when we look at why we’re broadcasting—it has to be to help people. And since people aren’t just sitting around with their ears perked up waiting for our message, we must help them want to listen to us.

All broadcasters hope to communicate their message. If we are best known for presenting dull subject-matter shows, what are we communicating?

If your approach to radio programming is to interview the specialist, if you are not doing a number of around-the-state, on-the-spot interviews or reports, then extension radio programming in your state may tend to be dull and not very interesting to listen to. No other broadcasters have as much from which to pick and choose as we do. And if you don’t have time to go out for a couple of days a month and get a half dozen good on-the-spot tapes, you are indeed too busy grinding out subject matter reports.

The alert broadcaster also records on the spot interviews over the phone. Work with the subject matter specialist for story leads and then go after them. You don’t really need him along, but instead work with the county agents. You do have a mind of your own about what’s good programming on radio. Also you can be more alert than most to what audiences need in information and motivation. Your programs should cause all the people in your state to enjoy hearing them. You should not be satisfied with less.

A few days ago, I had lunch and a long discussion with two key



men of the National Association of Broadcasters, Dr. Harold Niven, vice-president, and Charles T. Jones, Jr., director of radio information. Both of these men have to be alert to contemporary radio. They made some suggestions which I want to share with you.

1. *Be selective of the radio station in a particular coverage area.*
2. *Meet with station personnel—manager and program director.*
3. *Tailor your product (program) to their needs—length, style, etc.*
4. *Forget canned material (this is directed especially to county extension agents).*
5. *Be a member of the state broadcasters' association.*

In some states, extension radio specialists are associate members of the broadcasters' association. Primarily it is the managers who attend state meetings. I know a state association that makes appropriate awards to county extension broadcasters. The state extension radio specialist works out details and gets the selections made. Another state has such close relations with its state association that special continuing education sessions for station managers resulted. They covered such areas as determining community needs, reaching low-income people and communications management.

Most state associations have a newsletter for members. I know a state extension radio specialist who never misses having something in it. He doesn't always try to promote some program but tries to help keep broadcasters updated on results of radio research, new approaches to reach specific audiences, special events or opportunities for station personnel, services available to them, etc. And even though I could not vote in my state association's annual election of officers, I recall being asked to help distribute and count ballots and report the results. Oh yes, broadcasters like to have fun too. They bring spouses to their meetings and they encourage you to bring yours.

Now to the task of selecting what to broadcast. This often finds the extension broadcaster taking what is available and running with it. Wouldn't it be far better to do as some broadcasters do, and use your radio programs to reflect the efforts of an imaginary

or real task force. This month it may mean that all or most programs will emphasize the environment, another month on safety, another on how research benefits our lives, or using what you have to get what you want, and even understanding agriculture.

When you take on a major mission you then will find ways to enhance that thrust by every program you do. You can be the judge on whether the program fits the guidelines for the month. You can give purpose to broadcasting by mapping out what's to be accomplished. Results could be most encouraging. You no longer will be doing a set number of home economics, 4-H, community resource development, and agriculture programs. You will be tailoring all programs to further the thrust for the month. This gives your radio programs a purpose. You become a manager of information. Programs, if they are humanized, then, can have real impact.

Let's assume in planning sessions with each of your subject matter units it becomes clear that during the whole month of July extension in your state will feature safety. There is National Farm Safety Week. July is when the accident rate is high and there will be quite a bit written about safety during July. On radio what will be the approach?

I know a state that used radio to pack a wallop for safety—on the farm and in the home. The radio specialist did some checking with subject matter specialists to learn about accident victims who lived to tell about it: a farmer who lost both feet in a combine accident; a homemaker who suffered a blood clot from the kick of a cow; a 12-year-old boy who lost an eye from flying metal as he hammered on the axle of his wagon; and a doctor at a county hospital who treated many rural accident victims. The result—great cooperation from everyone.

Interviews were taped with the individuals where they lived. After having them explain what really happened, the interviewer asked the big question. How could your accident have been avoided? They all had ideas. The doctor told of at least a dozen different accidents and took the interviewer to the hospital beds of other accident victims. One man, just three days before, had lost an arm in a sawmill accident. He sounded groggy from medication



but he said it on the air. If he had it to do over he knew how he could have prevented the accident and saved his arm.

This was impact radio and it caused a lot of people to talk. Hopefully it saved lives and helped prevent many accidents. Also, it helped people to know and respect extension. This humanized safety information. A big spinoff from the radio interviews was a series of newspaper stories. These were written from the tapes.

What I have discussed here is not intended to stop subject-matter broadcasts. There are indeed many hard facts which can and should be presented by the authority. However, it is hoped that the extension radio specialist will take the lead to help determine what major areas of concern will be featured on radio. Once this is determined his role is to seek out ways to humanize the messages, make sure they suit the stations, and work continually to keep in tune with station managers, or at larger stations, the program director.