

PLEDGE

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not free. The audience just doesn't pay for it directly. They pay for it when they purchase a Milky Way or Kraft cheese, which include the cost of advertising. In public radio, it's hard for people to understand they need to send the money directly to us."

Second, public stations must master the trick of raising as much money as possible on the air without losing fans to boredom or frustration.

"No one likes fundraisers," says Deborah Proctor, station manager of WCPE radio in Wake Forest. "We don't like them either. People want classical music. They don't want us to talk."

But with major government budget cuts looming, mastering the art of on-air fundraising has become paramount.

PUBLIC FUNDING BLUES

Both federal and state lawmakers are considering proposals that would slash public financial support to public radio and TV.

In Washington, the House of Representatives passed a bill that proposes cutting funds to the Corporation for Public Broadcasting by 15 percent in 1996 and 30 percent in 1997. Congress created the non-profit in 1967 to fund public radio and TV.

Some representatives say they intend to increase the cuts until the funding is eliminated. When the *Journal* went to press, the U.S. Senate had not voted on the bill.

In 1991, North Carolina lawmakers cut all state funding to public radio stations tied to state universities. Stations such as WUNC, affiliated with the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and WFSS, affiliated with Fayetteville State University, saw their budgets cut.

Now, a similar bill being reviewed in the state House proposes ending state support of public radio stations tied to community colleges. The cuts would affect two stations: WNCW, which broadcasts from Isothermal Community College in Spindale, and WTEB, which broadcasts from Craven Community College in New Bern. Each now receives \$142,000 from the state.

Burr Beard, founding general manager at WNCW, says a combination of federal and state cuts could devastate his small station which broadcasts world music, folk classics and National Public Radio news to listeners in Western North Carolina.

"We'd lose 45 percent of our [\$600,000 annual] budget," he says. "We'd be in crisis mode."

To compensate, the station doubled the number of new members - or financial contributors to the station - it hoped to attract in its spring fundraiser.

A NECESSARY EVIL

Many public broadcast stations are increasing their fundraising goals this year to prepare for potential government funding cuts.

But they say the audience must be approached intelligently and delicately.

"You can't get on the air and drone on and be repetitious," says Linda Carr, a St. Louis-based fundraising consultant who has worked with public radio stations for more than 20 years. "The audience for public stations is very intelligent. They want to know why we're fundraising not just what it is."

Over the years, public stations have learned to limit and make productive use of the time spent on a single pitch. Radio station managers say pitching over eight minutes at a time is a death wish.

"It used to be 10 minutes and longer," says Loretta Rucker, a Brooklyn-based fundraising consultant. "But now we know differently, that it needs to be less and that it's good to vary the amount of time.

Breaks can go from 5 to 10 minutes."

At WUNC-TV, Director of Development Camille Patterson says 15 minutes is the boredom threshold for TV.

"The average message is about nine to 10 minutes, but never more than 15," she says.

Beyond this shared philosophy on time, public stations diverge on how best to make the on-air pitch. In North Carolina, styles range from dramatic to low-key, from lavish to no-nonsense.

FROM WOODWORK TO EMILY BRONTE

WUNC-TV dominates its radio peers in size and scope. With a \$15.6 million budget and state-wide network of 10 transmitters, it can be turned on in 2.3 million homes. According to the Nielson ratings, about 850,000 people watch it each week.

Only Robeson County residents can't tune in, but the station hopes to remedy that with a new transmitter scheduled for that region soon.

WUNC-TV recently wrapped up its on-air fundraiser, "Festival 95", which stretched over 25 days in March.

In comparison, public radio stations average seven days for their on-air fundraisers.

According to Patterson of WUNC-TV, the TV station relies on a "down-home", folksy approach.

"We don't use TelePrompted scripts," she says. "We just try to reinforce the merits of the program... We are much more down home, if you will, than other stations. We are much more neighborly about it."

Local personalities such as Triangle-area professors and business leaders as well as program celebrities like Rick Steves, who has a European travel show, pitch for the station during Festival, always keeping the talk friendly and familiar.

The style appears to be paying off.

This year, WUNC-TV raised more than \$2 million and ranked second in the U.S. among Public Broadcasting Service stations for total dollars raised during Festival. All PBS stations hold fundraising "Festivals" simultaneously. This year, only a New York City station raised more, bringing in \$2.5 million.

"It's a pretty big deal in the public television world," Patterson says. "I can't remember seeing any station other than New York that went over \$2 million."

In Wilmington, public radio station WHQR relies on drama and entertainment to pull off its on-air pledge drives.

"The trick with fundraisers is to try to maintain a little dignity for us and the listeners," says station manager Michael Titterton, who helped found the community-based station 11 years ago. "What we try to do is recognize that on-air pledge drives are not an interruption of begging and pleading but one enormous celebratory program."

The station designs radio dramas with fundraising themes. In the past, it's presented "Gone with the Pledge," "Pledgablanca" and a popular "Wuthering Heights," featuring a pledge-minded Heathcliff and Catherine.

"We all know what's going on here," Titterton says. "Begging and pleading and cajoling don't work. It's not appealing."

WHQR also steers clear of fancy premiums - gifts given by stations in exchange for donations. Titterton says keeping track of special gifts became too complicated, and the tactic belittled the message that listeners should contribute to the station for its own sake rather than for a free concert ticket or restaurant meal.

In the mountains, on the other hand, WNCW capitalizes on crafts by local artists and artisans to tempt donors.

"We sound like the folk arts center here," Beard says. "With one-of-

a-kind handmade items [for premiums], we can raise the level of the pledge."

Last year, donors who contributed \$50 or more got a wooden bowl by craftsman Stoney Lamar. Donors who topped \$500 received a home-visit and free consultation by Ken Gaylord, a local architect specializing in energy conservation.

In Wake Forest, WCPE chose silence - its own - as an incentive to donors.

For a month before its on-air pledge drive began, the radio station told listeners that every \$1,000 donated early would lop off one hour from the nine-day pledge drive.

"Internally, we're calling it the 'Shut Us Up campaign,'" says Proctor, general manager of the station whose motto is "great classical music without a lot of talk."

WCPE receives no government funding for its \$1.2 million annual budget. Since it went on the air in 1978, it's relied only on private donations.

On the other hand, in Fayetteville, WFSS gave listeners an earful about potential government funding cuts. The station's budget was cut in half in 1991, when the state withdrew funding. Currently, the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB) provides more than 42 percent of the station's \$400,000 budget.

"If CPB goes, we'd be crippled," says Frank Sundram, general manager.

To compensate, the station raised its spring fundraising goal from \$25,000 to \$40,000.

In addition, the station faces an uphill battle with membership loss due to a high turnover in Fayetteville's military community.

"Every four to five years, we have a 100 percent turnover in our membership base. It sets us back considerably," Sundram says. "We can't use the algorithm that other radio stations use to calculate membership turnover. It gets thrown out the window with us."

Chapel Hill's WUNC, which receives 17 percent of its \$1.4 million annual budget from CPB, also stressed potential government cuts to its listeners.

"It seems pretty clear that the amount [from CPB] will be reduced," says Shirley Robinson, director of development for the 19-year-old station that features classical music and NPR programs. "We're telling them their financial help is more important than ever."

In Roanoke Rapids, after less than eight months on the air, WZRZ is new to fundraising. Co-station manager George Campbell says they're just trying to get the word out to listeners that the station exists.

"Our goal is to attract 1000 members this spring. We've got 270 so far," Campbell says.

Overall, North Carolina public radio and TV stations are more effective than their counterparts throughout the U.S. for on-air fundraising, persuading on average 10 percent of their listeners and viewers to contribute each year. Nationally, the average is nine percent.

But reaching the elusive 90 percent could prove crucial in coming years.

"Our job is to convince those people [who don't contribute] that they should be contributors," says Patterson of WUNC-TV. "Look at the gap [between members and total viewers]! Look how many more could be contributing. Those are the people we want to reach. I'd like to sit down in their living room and say, 'You watch these programs. How about donating?'"

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