

Gay radio outlet makes format pay

By Deborah Wilker
REUTERS

MIAMI — When WPYM-FM took to the airwaves on the last day of December 2001, the rhythmic-dance music outlet owned by Atlanta-based Cox Radio Inc. didn't set out to do much more than reflect the pulsing South Beach club scene.

With few commercials and endless blocks of hopped-up top 40 remixes and underground club hits, "Party 93" quickly found its way into bars, cars and gyms — a format tailor-made for clubgoers and fitness buffs who comprised the station's core audience.

Then, just a few months into its run, WPYM took a turn.

Interspersed between such songs as Razor N' Guido's "Do It Again" and the latest Madonna remix and ads for Cadillac and Budweiser came a slate of new promos for such events as the Gay and Lesbian Film Festival, Fort Lauderdale's Gay Pride Parade and AIDS fund-raisers like Miami's world-renowned White Party.

What was striking, though, was not that WPYM had recognized that many of its listeners were gay but the matter-of-fact way the station addressed it.

This was still more than a year before Bravo and NBC hit pay dirt with "Queer Eye for the Straight Guy," a show that has certainly loosened parameters in mainstream broadcasting.

Yet back in early 2002, WPYM simply went about things as if big, 100,000-watt radio stations in major markets had always been the proud sponsors of gay-themed events — even though it was an approach that most conservative hit-radio corporations had likely never even considered.

Now, two years later, the

station continues to earn big profits and strong ratings, while the "gay aesthetic" (as marketing mavens call it) is so seamlessly integrated that few seem to notice anything unique about it.


"This has been a gutsy move," says Sean Ross, a radio analyst with New Jersey-based Edison Research. "Cox has certainly proven to be more innovative."

Given all that has recently transpired in television, should the FM dial be gearing up for gay themes? Has WPYM made a case that bears watching?

"If sales managers aren't thinking about it, they should be," says Carmen Cacciatore, co-founder of New York-based Fly-Life Marketing. "Radio has been

behind the curve. They've been cautious. But things have definitely opened up. Gay spending power is enormous. Once there's more clarity and more research, they're going to get that it's just as important as testing the Hispanic or African-American market or any market."

The club-rooted, pure-dance format that WPYM plays is typically either loved or hated — there's no in-between, no casual fans. But the demographic of those who do tune in is an advertiser's dream. Listeners gay and straight tend to be hip, free-spending professionals who thrive on excitement and are exceedingly loyal to the format — that is, when they can find it on the dial.



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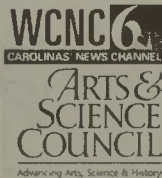
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