

Morning shows shake listeners out of bed with variety of bells, whistles and rattles



Steve Reynolds of WRDU 106 FM

By ANNE DOGGETT
Staff Writer

It's 6:59 a.m. Curled snugly beneath the sheets, you don't care about anything besides the serene confines of your bedroom.

Suddenly, a sharp voice levels the wall of silence, blasting you out of bed and waking your roommate who doesn't have a class until 11 a.m. You are not alone — a cheery voice reverberates around the room and in your head. Scraping the sleep out of your eyes and the film off your tongue, it's time to eradicate another severe case of the dreaded Morning Face.

Enter your favorite morning radio personality.

Just a few years ago, the morning radio formats so popular today were just experimental setups at a few innovative stations. Current morning radio formats are big business as stations compete for listeners during their industry's biggest time of the day.

Along with that intensive growth has come increased competition for morning listeners. As a result, radio stations are arming disc jockeys with verbal weapons for combat in the battle for the morning listener.

In rapidly growing areas like the Triangle, listeners can choose a morning radio show that complements their morning character — whether they spring from bed like a jack-in-the-box or pound their snooze buttons and drag through morning routines.

Then there are the disc jockeys, some whose job it is to be outrageous as early as 5:30 a.m. "The Morning Zoo," WZZU's (94 FM) morning show, features a pair known as the Equal Opportunity Offenders, Donna Mason and Gary Dickson, Mason and Dickson rarely draw the line at the boundary of good taste. The two stir listeners' emotions by hanging up on callers, ranting and raving and doing something they call "mondo comedy."

But isn't it hard to be outrageous so early in the morning? "It's part of the game," Dickson said.

Despite the sometimes raucous format, the two rarely get complaints. Dickson pointed out that the few complaints are priceless and too funny not to air. Mason added that while there are no written boundaries for radio, stations in areas like New York the jocks get away with a lot more, including profanity.

In contrast is WRDU's (106 FM) "Reynolds and Company," the station's morning program for nearly two years. Steve Reynolds said his morning team prefers to ease listeners into their daily routine.

"People don't want to be beaten over the head in the morning," Reynolds said.

"Listeners are our friends, and we are the first contact some people have in the morning," said Kevin Silva, Reynolds' partner. "We have to be nice. But that doesn't mean we can't have fun."

Instead of berating listeners, Reynolds and Silva said they



Gary Dickson of 94Z FM

believe airtime should be spent entertaining listeners by providing information and anecdotal features. For example, the "Relatables" segment invites listeners to call in and offer unusual experiences people encounter during their daily routine.

Reynolds, a six-year radio veteran, uses the "Least Common Denominator Theory," in his show. This theory means radio personalities speak in a manner that the audience can comprehend.

Moreover, Silva and Reynolds don't confuse the audience with technical jargon.

Between WZZU's zaniness and WRDU's laid-back approach is WDCG (105 FM). Morning man Bill Jordan says that WDCG tries to stylistically position itself between WZZU and WRDU. Jordan said his station uses a mass appeal format that offers no out-of-bounds jokes and no junk.

"The key is to be yourself and have a good time," said Jordan,

who joined WDCG in February. While each show has a different approach to interest listeners, the common element among the three shows is providing information.

"People want (information) in the first few minutes when they wake up," Silva said. "These are useful tools in orienting drowsy listeners and preparing them for the day they haven't begun yet. Everything else is a bonus."

It takes more than a sense of humor to prepare for a morning program. Staying on top of current events is essential for the morning teams in the race to stay ahead of rival stations. Each tries to be more on top of events than the others by using newspapers, periodicals and television, as well as "keeping our eyes and ears open while living our daily lives," Reynolds said.

But fun is still what sells. WZZU has Janet from Another Planet, Horrible Scopes (off-beat horoscopes), Laugh Tracks (live tapes of famous comedians) and bits that are off-the-wall comedy tapes produced by the Zoo Crew.

WRDU has found a way to tell dirty jokes without being offensive. The Thursday Morning Censored Joke throws in a piece of R-rated humor while still publicly airing only the PG-rated material. Listeners then must call the radio station for the off-color punch line.

Humor plays a lesser role for

WDCG. Jordan said the station instead puts an emphasis on a cleaner program with less talk.

Morning radio today is all about choice. While some people wake up in a good mood and bounce out of bed at 6 a.m., others need

something to drive away the morning blues. So jump, crawl, stretch or leap for your radio and turn on the morning personality that gives you what you want.

Just be careful not to wake up your roommate.

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Variety must be key for AM

By JEANNA BAXTER
Staff Writer

Is AM radio becoming obsolete?

In an article in the July issue of Business: North Carolina, Bill Jennings, vice president and general manager of WBT-AM in Charlotte, said AM is dying because there is a whole generation of people who grew up listening to FM. Those who listen to AM continue to do so out of habit.

Why is FM so popular? Some say it is the signal — FM has higher fidelity and clarity, while AM waves, which carry farther, are more susceptible to interference.

In addition, FM has a 20-year headstart in broadcasting in stereo. To the average listener, though, quality AM stereo sounds just as good as FM.

John R. Bittner, professor and chairman of the RTVMP department, feels that AM's biggest setback is that it is not broadcasting what the majority wants to hear.

Many AM stations are attempting to lure listeners back by copying FM's music format rather than concentrating on talk shows, news, sports, religion and ethnic programming.

Don Curtis, president of both the State Broadcasting Association and Great American Media, suggests that one solution would be for AM to develop creative programs not available on FM. "Variety is the key," said Curtis. Curtis said that Great American Media, located in Raleigh,

owns several N.C. radio stations and is still buying AM stations, but only if they are AM/FM combinations. "One of AM stations' greatest setbacks is that they are owned by AM/FM operators who concentrate on the FM segment," he said.

According to Bittner, during its early years, FM radio was noted for playing high quality continuous music, such as jazz and classical, that was not readily available on AM stations. Gradually the continuous music changed to album cuts, Top 40, and other formats appealing to a younger audience. They switched over to FM, followed by many advertisers.

Radio stations have very distinct demographics. Figures in Business: North Carolina show that the nation's 8,500 commercial stations generated more than \$6.6 billion in advertising revenues last year. AM generated only one-third of this. A 60-second spot on a major FM station may sell for as much as \$200. A comparable spot on a small AM station may sell for as little as \$10.

AM was still the king of radio during the 60's and into the 70s. According to Bryan McIntyre, general manager of WPTF-680AM in Raleigh, 85 percent of the nation's listeners tuned in to AM stations during that time. In the last decade, this ratio has reversed to 72 percent in favor of FM.

AM's decline leveled off last spring, probably due to innovative programming being employed by many AM stations.

WPTF-680 AM, which according to last fall's Arbitron ratings has returned to the No. 1 position in the Triangle area, is one example of this new trend.

"WPTF-680 AM has always been known as a reliable source for news, sports and information," McIntyre said. "If no one listens to WPTF-680 AM for its music, why develop a music format?"

"A good strong community- and sports-oriented AM station such as WCHL-AM, in Chapel Hill, will always have its niche, maintaining a loyal group of listeners," Bittner said.

Henry Hinton, vice president and general manager of WCHL-AM, said he does not believe competition between AM and FM is an issue. "A good station does well regardless of whether it is AM or FM. Our profits have risen substantially over the past five years; this year is no exception."

According to Hinton, station studies show the number of listeners among morning drivers is up 40 percent since last year, and in general, good AM stations are doing better now than in the last 10 years. Although FM is currently the leading contender, new technology such as digital transmission systems and audio disks may become the balancing force between AM and FM in the 1990s. The long term effects of stereo television, VCRs and cable TV on radio are still speculative as well.

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