

**COMMUNICATION CHALLENGES FACING RSFM****(RADIO SHIMLA)**

Communitas

ISSN 1023-0556

2004 9: 169 - 172s

**Patrick Meyer\*****BACKGROUND AND INTRODUCTION**

A campus-based community radio station is no new idea to South Africa since stations have been broadcasting here for the last 30 years. Initially these stations had been used as communication tools to provide information to their respective cafeterias via landline. Among the pioneering stations have been RSFM (Radio Shimla), RMR (Rhodes Music Radio), Tuks FM, Matie FM and Puk FM, to mention a few.

Through the respective campus radio stations, students were given the opportunity to voice their opinion on relevant matters pertaining to student life. With the rise in popularity of these radio stations and relevant changes in the broadcasting industry, it was evident that there was growth.

The stations started applying at the IBA (Independent Broadcasting Authority) for transmitters to broadcast on FM (frequency modulation). RSFM started broadcasting to the Bloemfontein student community on FM on 09 October 1995 on the frequency 97.0. The station was granted a temporary licence, which expired annually. In 1999 the IBA allowed RSFM to apply for a permanent four-year broadcasting license which was procured that same year.

The four-year licence allowed RSFM to focus more on providing a professional product of high quality to the student community of Bloemfontein, rather than having to be concerned about the continuity of broadcasts.

RSFM is now broadcasting from the heart of the UFS (University of the Free State) campus to a youthful audience between the ages of 14 and 26. Like other community radio stations RSFM faces communication challenges and it is a goal of the station to communicate to its target audience in the most effective manner possible. The station's on-air product encompasses 99% music and talk and 1% advertisements, jingles and stings. The on-air sound proves to be the ultimate communication challenge to be perfected.

\* Patrick Meyer is Station Manager of RSFM, a campus-based community radio station in Bloemfontein, and a Master's student in Media Studies in the Department of Communication and Information Studies at the University of the Free State.

## **THE TYPICAL RSFM LISTENER**

It is important to first describe the RSFM listener to clearly give a reason why our station focuses on communication challenges, like music and talk. The typical RSFM listener is described as a student who is intelligent, enjoys entertainment and is a sport fanatic. The listener is culturally inquisitive and takes pleasure in his/her image. Additionally the listener is a dreamer who wants to be independent yet, is in search of the perfect love match. The communication challenge for the programming manager, presenters and newsreaders is to address these characteristics in the most effective and efficient manner possible.

## **THE MODEL OF COMMUNICATION AND RADIO**

In a typical model for communication to be effective, the receiver must decode the message from the sender and deliver feedback that assures the sender that the message was received and perceived accurately. There should also be little, or no, distortion in the communication channel. This is probably the biggest communication challenge that radio faces throughout the world, RSFM being no exception. The presenter is the sender, the radio the medium through which the message is received and the receiver could be anybody tuning into the specific radio frequency. Difficulties arising from this model are the following: firstly, the presenter cannot see his/her audience and has to broadcast to an audience as dictated to by the radio station. Secondly, there is no interaction between sender and receiver, unless a live phone call is taken on air. Due to these facts, it can be concluded that there will be distortion in the communication process.

Adding to the distortion is the fact that radio is often a secondary medium, mostly in the background, and there is seldom active listening by the receiver. The receiver might also be doing other things while the radio station is delivering its message. Due to inactive listening, immense distortion is created in the communication process and therefore the message is often misinterpreted and misunderstood. No feedback can be given to the presenter and this can often lead to ineffective communication whereby a listener might choose to stop listening, or tune into another station.

To combat this problem, RSFM and other stations have phone-in programs through which a listener can comment or respond to broadcasts. Research is also undertaken by radio stations to discover what will influence a person to listen to a particular radio station, or not. This research method gives a fairly good idea of who your listener is. The SAARF (South African Advertising Research Foundation) also provides statistics on RAMS (Radio Audience Measurement Survey) and LSM (Living Standard Measurement) for radio stations to utilise for their programming. The LSM gives a radio station a fair idea of how wealthy and educated a specific market is, as well as what products they are most likely to buy. This can be very beneficial to a radio station in overcoming the difficulty of communicating to an invisible audience.

## **COMMUNICATION CHALLENGE – MUSIC**

RSFM is a communication medium which uses information to inform and educate its youth market. This market sector of the new millennium is fickle and easily swayed in

opinion. It is a challenge for programming to maintain loyalty as well as entice potential listeners. RSFM ascribes to a policy of 75% music and 24% talk on-air. Music is the key to maintain a young audience. A Top 40-format is used as a communication tool to increase listenership for the station. The music of today has a greater impact on the youth market than any presenter or news reader.

Modern music is associated with strong emotions and is thus very applicable to a young and emotional contemporary society. Therefore RSFM sees it as one of its great communication challenges to play a mix of music that captures our listener and keeps them tuned-in to the station.

Music is a tool which is often used by the youth as a means of escapism. Music makes them feel part of a world that is glamorous and more pleasurable than their own. It is the dream of many young people to become rock or pop stars. There is an immense following of today's musical stars by the youth, even to the point of idolisation. The music listened to by the youth also has cult followings which shows what impact a band or musician can have on a young audience. Britney Spears, Avril Lavigne, Linkin Park and Eminem are just a few examples of music stars who have a huge influence on the youth. A radio station such as RSFM provides in these needs by playing the kind of music that appeals to the youth.

The solution to the communication challenge of music is to constantly keep the station's music updated and fresh. The music should communicate to the listener that this radio station adores and follows the trends in music just as avidly as they do. The top hits have to be played day-in and day-out. It is also imperative to conduct auditorium research, focus groups and telephonic research to ascertain which songs are the most requested and popular at a specific time.

### **COMMUNICATION CHALLENGE – TALK**

The 24% talk on-air is also an immense communication challenge for our station. Our presenters have to speak the language of the youth and also address issues that are relevant and of importance to our market.

We live in an information age. The youth is constantly bombarded with information from mass media as well as teachers, parents and friends. For this reason it is difficult for RSFM to also claim a cut of the information highway. From preliminary quantitative research findings it has been established that humour, entertainment, sport and Kopsie news, in no particular order, rank as the most important sources of information for the youth audience of Bloemfontein. Part of the communication challenge is to present this information in a fun-loving, modern and entertaining manner. Our presenters are mainly students at the UFS. Due to this fact, they are more aware and can very often relate to the target audience. The RSFM presenters use jargon and colloquial language to sound as informal as possible, yet still relay the information in a credible manner.

Since RSFM is a community radio station, there are many licence conditions that have to be adhered to, as outlined by ICASA (Independent Communication Authority of South Africa). Such licence conditions stipulate that educational and factual programs

on topics such as rape, HIV, women abuse and similar others have to be included in the stations on-air programming. The average youth will not listen to long spells of talk on such serious issues. They would rather listen to a CD or another station that plays more music that they are fond of. This is a communication challenge which is difficult to overcome. RSFM overcomes this challenge by broadcasting shorter talk programs of between 7 and 10 minutes on such serious topics more frequently than, for instance, a one hour long talk program. The programs are also presented in a more up-beat and exciting manner. RSFM attempts to present serious issues in an appropriate manner, extracting the essence of the topic to make it as impactful as possible. Interviewees are young, yet highly skilled or knowledgeable in their respective fields. This is not an easy task for the station and there is still much work and research to be done into the broadcasting of these programs, which can either attract or totally defer an audience.

### **CONCLUSION**

RSFM, as well as community stations in South Africa do not always realise the immense task involved in communicating effectively and continuously for 24 hours per day, 7 days per week and 365 days per year. Each and every second on air must be accounted for and broadcast in the most appealing way possible. This means making sure that every song played on air has gone through a screening process. The presenters must also be thoroughly trained and competent to deliver the very best vocal message they can. However, no matter how perfect the sending of the message, it must always be remembered that there may be an immense amount of distortion in it. This is precisely what makes radio a challenging and exciting medium for presenters, news readers and especially programme managers.