

# “INTERRUPT Rush!”

Certainly, The Rush Limbaugh Show is a programming asset I would rather play-with than play-against. But, as a News/Talk consultant, I work for two types of stations: Limbaugh affiliates, and stations-that-compete-with his affiliates. So I've got two playbooks.

- When, in any given market, we're the affiliate, we treat Rush like Talk Radio's biggest star. His show is "appointment listening," on par with radio legends like Arthur Godfrey, Lowell Thomas, Paul Harvey, and Howard Stern. Employing proven strategies and tactics, we leverage his presence to make the entire station bigger.
- When, in another market, my client station competes with his affiliate, Limbaugh's a buffoon. He's predictable, a one-joke act. He's 1991. His show is a rant, not the powerful "two-way radio" that makes a well-done Talk station so engaging. Rush is passive-listening programming-from-somewhere-else, and we do things to make our station sound more interactive and local.

The tactic I outline here is from that first playbook (though this document also contains a peek into the other playbook). Despite its deliberately provocative title, "INTERRUPT Rush!" is very pro-Rush.

## OBJECTIVES:

- To grow Time Spent Listening (TSL) to The Rush Limbaugh Show, three ways:
  1. Via what consultants call "horizontal maintenance," meaning getting-listeners-who-already-listen-at-a-certain-time-of-day to listen-at-that-same-time-more-days-per-week. Mondays are particularly opportune, and this promotion is structured accordingly.
  2. Via "vertical maintenance," meaning getting-people-who-are-already-listening to keep-listening, even just a few more minutes each time they tune-in, Arbitron gold. And causing people-who-already-listen-at-one-time-of-day to listen-at-other-times-same-day.
  3. And, because Arbitron's unaided recall methodology measures what diarykeepers **remember**, to increase reported listening. Rush Limbaugh's considerable familiarity is a double-edged sword. He's so familiar... such a habit...that listening can become second nature. So this promotion will help remind Dittohead diarykeepers THAT they listened.
- To make The Rush Limbaugh Show sound less imported, and to make him sound more-a-part-of-your-station's-on-air family.
  - Because your Arbitron success rests on your listeners' ability to remember four letters (your call letters), Maha Rushie isn't doing you any favors repeating "E.I.B." so often. "INTERRUPT Rush!" is one more way to inject call letters into his show.
  - Because so many callers are competing with each other, and with Limbaugh's ego, it's very hard for your listeners to be heard on Rush's show. Even if your local Dittoheads do get past the busy signal, call screeners eliminate all but the callers THEY think Rush wants. "INTERRUPT Rush!" offers your local listeners what's tantamount to a "side door" past Limbaugh's censors.
- To mitigate – indeed to EXPLOIT – Limbaugh's "baggage:"
  - He's Talk radio's biggest star ever. Possibly its biggest ego too. So offering your listeners the means to "INTERRUPT Rush!" lets David trump Goliath. People always cheer for the little guy. Rush takes himself much too seriously. This is listeners' chance to, good-naturedly, knock-him-down-a-peg.
  - One reason that Rush became the star he is – especially early on, when his show was more entertaining, and less self-centered -- was its unpredictability. "INTERRUPT Rush!" is a way to re-ignite the sparks that make Talk radio crackle.

- Something else that got lost in the process of Limbaugh reading-his-own-clippings was interactivity. Talk radio is about dialogue; but, most days, The Rush Limbaugh Show is a monologue that tolerates callers. Even on “Open Line Friday,” it takes Rush forever to get to the callers. “INTERRUPT Rush!” takes back control.
- Create value-added for your Sales department. El Rushbo is generally a **ratings** hit (the Mt. Everest on some affiliates’ hour-by-hour graph); but his bottom-line **revenue** performance is less consistent. Stiff clearance fees make this show a loss leader for many affiliates. And many News/Talk stations make more money on the weekend home improvement show than they bill in Limbaugh-specific sponsorships. So I’ve included a Sales wrinkle in this Programming promotion.

## HAVE YOU FIGURED IT OUT YET?

Here’s the bit:

- Set up a dedicated voicemail box that your listeners can direct-dial into. Ideally, the number will spell something cute. For instance, 4-3-9-7-8-7-4 spells “HEY RUSH!” Or you could look for other available numbers which spell permutations of your call letters and/or your dial position and/or R-U-S-H.
- On-air promos invite your listeners to call-in and leave a comment, which you’ll play back during The Rush Limbaugh Show. Solicit calls ROS, to recycle audience from other dayparts to Rush’s show (“vertical maintenance”). Your promo copy and voicemail greeting should include copy points along these lines:

“MAYBE YOU’VE TRIED CALLING-INTO THE RUSH LIMBAUGH SHOW...BUT YOU GOT THE BUSY SIGNAL. OR YOU ACTUALLY GOT THROUGH, ONLY TO BE SCREENED-OUT BY EL RUSHBO’S GATEKEEPERS...OR YOU DIED-ON-HOLD. OR DON’T YOU EVEN BOTHER CALLING, BECAUSE YOU THINK THE BLOWHARD ONLY WANTS TO HEAR FROM PEOPLE WHO AGREE WITH HIM. NOW, YOU CAN ‘INTERRUPT RUSH!’ BY CALLING A SPECIAL NUMBER FOR WXXX LISTENERS ONLY! IT’S A LOCAL CALL, AND YOU’LL NEVER GET THE BUSY SIGNAL. YOU CAN CALL ANYTIME, DAY OR NIGHT. TAKE ALL THE TIME YOU WANT TO RECORD YOUR MESSAGE, AND IF YOU TRIP-OVER-YOUR-TONGUE, YOU CAN STOP AND RE-RECORD YOUR MESSAGE UNTIL IT SOUNDS JUST THE WAY YOU WANT. SELECTED CALLS WILL BE EXCERPTED AND HEARD ON THE RUSH LIMBAUGH SHOW, EVERY MONDAY, NOON TO THREE ON WXXX AM860. WANT TO ‘INTERRUPT RUSH?’ CALL 4-3-9-7-8-7-4. THAT’S ‘HEY RUSH’ ON YOUR TELEPHONE KEYPAD. OR MAKE IT A FREE CALL ON BELL SOUTH MOBIL. JUST TOUCH POUND R-U-S-H. IF YOU’RE TIRED OF HEARING ONLY HIS OPINION, CALL 4-3-9-7-8-7-4, TO ‘INTERRUPT RUSH’ ON WXXX.”

Make this production fun!

- Many of Limbaugh’s regular listeners are his political opposites, and tune-in to scoff at the fathead. Many others, who agree with his viewpoint, find his style off-putting. Either way, this chance to talk-back is a good-natured jab at The Big Guy.
- Your promo soliciting Interrupters might include quick, particularly-belligerent Rush clips. Begin the promo by starting his theme song (“My City Was Gone” by The Pretenders), then yank-the-needle-off-the-record.
- Then, in-show, drop call excerpts into a produced donut that you run in unsold :60 commercial positions.
- Note: This is NOT a scam. Promo and voicemail greeting copy doesn’t promise or imply that callers will be heard nationally, or even heard by Rush!
  - No, Boston-area Interrupters won’t be heard by Dittoheads in Detroit. But they don’t care. Bostonians aren’t listening in Detroit. They’ll hear themselves, and each others’ familiar regional accents during The Rush Limbaugh Show, right there in Boston.
  - And, no, Rush won’t hear their comments “interrupt” him. And you should play-that-up. “NOT ONLY WON’T RUSH BE ABLE TO CENSOR YOU, HE WON’T EVEN HEAR YOU!”
- Why Mondays for caller playback?
  - You’ll probably have more unsold spot avails than later in the week. And if, as in the example copy above, you involve a sponsor, those unsold avails are suddenly worth something, perhaps as a value-added promotion that’s the closer for a Rush Limbaugh Show sponsorship. Or a wireless phone advertiser.
  - Monday tune-in can also help your horizontal maintenance. Monday may be that-day-they-otherwise-wouldn’t-have-listened. And if they start the week listening to your station, they might finish it there.

That was an idea from my pro-Rush playbook. And I promised you a peek at that other playbook, the one we use in markets where my client station competes with a Limbaugh affiliate...though the advice which follows is of equal value to local talent at both Rush and non-Rush stations. It's reprinted from my column in Talkers magazine:

## **IF RUSH JUMPED OFF A CLIFF, WOULD YOU JUMP TOO?**

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Arguably, he saved the AM band, when he led "The Talk Radio Revolution" in the early 1990s. And all these years later, Rush Limbaugh remains radio's top talker.

Some grouse that syndication has wiped out local on-air jobs. But would there be more local on-air positions today if Limbaugh never came along, and all those AM stations were still playing Jerry Vale tunes? Doubtful. If anything, Rush begat a new generation of local hosts.

Certainly, El Rushbo's work is instructive to his local counterparts. As do some other ex-DJs-who-transition-to-Talk, Limbaugh found success by deftly applying the production techniques of music radio, in effect "playing-the-hits" and working the clock. He preps like crazy. He has an opinion, and isn't shy about it. These are all fundamentals that locals hosts will do well to emulate.

But not everything Maha Rushie does is technique you'll want to mimic. Avoid these bad habits and crutches:

### **MAKE YOUR LISTENER -- NOT YOURSELF -- THE CENTER OF ATTENTION.**

I make my living listening to talk radio, all across the USA. And, too often, I hear caricatures of talk hosts. Hosts who sound like Talk radio's version of that goofy DJ voice George Carlin used to do. The approach is bellicose, self-centered, inside-out, and "I," "I," "I," "ME," "ME," "ME;" rather than the more-engaging, outside-in "YOU" and "YOUR." As you listen to Rush, and to your own aircheck, be honest. Does the person you're hearing sound like someone you'd like to be seated next to on a long flight?

### **TALK-TO -- NOT DOWN-TO -- LISTENERS.**

I wince every time I hear Rush say "YOU PEOPLE." Isn't that what Ross Perot said when he put his foot in his mouth speaking to the NAACP? At any given moment, you may have thousands of people listening, but they're only listening one-at-a-time. When you say "YOU," it's first person singular, not plural. Avoid phrases like "ALL OF YOU" and "THOSE OF YOU." Radio is an intimate, one-on-one experience, not a PA system. In the words of a talented sportscaster who once worked for me, "we're FedExing into peoples' brains."

### **MORE CALLERS = MORE INTERESTING**

Yes, use your point-of-view as the show's jumping-off point. Nothing's duller than a host who plays-it-down-the-middle. If you bait callers well, half will agree, half will disagree, and they'll all end up using your show to argue with each other. What makes Talk radio different -- OK, I'll say it...BETTER -- than other formats? It's two-way radio! Dialogue, not monologue. So why should it take forever for Rush to get to the phones on Open Line Friday? Make your show the local chat room, like the hip bar where people go to meet other people. Yes, it takes talent to host a talk show. But no matter how good you are, there are more of them than there are of you. Callers are characters, who introduce diversity, emotion, humor, information-you-don't-have, and another important ingredient that Rush seems to have forgotten lately...

### **SPONTANEITY!**

Fact: Arbitron ratings don't measure what people listen to. "Unaided recall" methodology measures what people remember-having-listened-to. So make a deposit in listeners' memory banks by surprising them occasionally. Keep 'em guessing. In his heyday, Imus was the master of this; and Howard Stern fans fear they'll miss something if they don't tune-in. But you already know what Rush will talk about tomorrow, don't you? That hurts what consultants delight in calling "horizontal maintenance" (same-time day-to-day recycling). Predictability is dangerous. Accordingly...

### **KEEP COMING UP WITH NEW MATERIAL**

Memo to Rush: Clinton isn't president any more. Here's an idea that will both instantly freshen your material, and

accomplish something wonderful for the charity of your choice. Challenge Bubba to a pay-per-view TV event. You and the ex-president each pick a charity, and divide the revenue. Two chairs, two microphones, no moderator, no format, two hours, one two-minute break (consisting of a :60 PSA for each charity). Then, when the TV show is over, your radio show can join The New Millennium. Or, as a GM I consult (a Rush affiliate) commented, "If those darn liberals that Limbaugh rails about are THAT wrong, won't they simply self-destruct? Why must every day's show be a tirade against the same boogeyman?"

#### AVOID BEING UNDULY NEGATIVE

Back when Limbaugh's show was more entertaining, it was more...entertaining. Now, it's largely a rant, a lecture. Often angry-sounding-enough parents with kids in the car might tune-out. Be for things, not just against things.

#### DON'T TAKE YOURSELF TOO SERIOUSLY

I honestly think Rush honestly thinks he's influencing policy. Hey, it's a show!

Let me be clear, my client stations fall into two categories, those with, and those without, Rush Limbaugh. And I'd sure rather play with him than play against him.

Many of Limbaugh's present affiliates were upgrades, not the stations he started on in those markets. When he was young and hungry, more-entertaining and more-interactive, and radio's new thing, The Big Station often looked down its nose at Limbaugh; indeed at the idea of clearing a non-local show during daylight hours. Until Rush beat the local show on The Big Station, whereupon The Big Station snapped him up. Listening now, it's often easy to wonder: Is he there because he's good? Or is he good because he's there?

Try not to forget where you came from, and who's ultimately in charge. It's the listener.

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