

Merlin Meltdown: Lessons Learned

Special to Talkers magazine, by Holland Cooke • July 19, 2012

Admittedly, I had a tough time hearing these stations objectively, for two reasons:

- By the time I heard 'em in-car, I had been pre-disposed by terms like "abortion" and "crib dead" in published reviews.
- Having programmed WTOP/Washington for 7 years, I'm an aficionado, a tough grader for this format.

These conspicuous flops should NOT suggest that news doesn't belong on FM, where some 80% of Time Spent Listening now occurs, and with music radio's days now numbered. Heck, WTOP is the USA's top biller, something no other station outside NY/LA/Chicago station ever accomplished.

Indeed, some good came out of this: Merlin nudged CBS to flank their WBBM/Chicago with a FM simulcast, and similarly-supporting either-or-both WCBS and/or WINS seems as prudent as inevitable.

That said, the Merlin fiasco does demonstrate that simply-being-on-FM doesn't ensure success. During my 1984-1990 stint there, WTOP was a stand-alone on 1500AM. We had to give listeners a reason to weather the snap-crackle-pop; and if you listen to modern-day WTOP on its multiple FM sticks, you'll still hear 'em earn their success, minute-by-minute-by-minute.

Other lessons learned from the Merlin mess:

- On-air talent: Look before you leap.
- Owners: Don't experiment on-air. Be clear: I'm NOT putting-down Merlin's programmer for not-having-had-all-news-experience. I went to WTOP from a music station...BECAUSE I was from music radio, I was told, when instructed to "play the hits" there. Merlin's stations defied fundamentals about the appliance-like way heavy users consume all-news radio. And what's with the reverb?
- Rehearse: "You never get a second chance to make a first impression;" and technical gremlins and fumbling talent hurt whatever early sampling Merlin's frat-boy stunts brought to the stations.
- Quality control matters: EVEN IF your information needs are sated by two reports about a Marshall's shoe sale before a single mention of that day's stock market tailspin, you won't sit-through two-network-commercials-airing-FIVE-TIMES-each-in-one-hour...especially if one of 'em is that annoying Troy Aikman/Hulk Hogan spot in-which The Hulkster says "BRUTHER" to the intended female target audience.

Read more, in HC's Talkers magazine archive, at www.HollandCooke.com