

Research Reveals How Radio Stations Can Better Engage Their Audiences on Facebook

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INTRODUCTION

Coleman Insights is conducting a series of “Quick Look” research studies designed to investigate new media issues of interest through interviews of “real people” in individual sessions. Our goal is to quickly develop an understanding of perceptions and level of usage and engagement of various new media offerings. In this latest “Quick Look” investigation, we set out to determine whether radio stations are truly engaging their audience on Facebook. What posts are working and what posts are not? Do radio stations post too much or too little content on Facebook? Is the inclusion of advertising content offending the audience? Have stations found the right “voice” to draw in their audience, or are they simply publishing press releases from the marketing department?

To begin to answer these questions, we conducted individual interviews with Facebook fans of an Alternative radio station in a major market. While listener expectations will likely vary by specific radio format, this “Quick Look” report offers a number of general insights on Facebook engagement with implications for a range of radio formats as well as other traditional media brands looking to engage their audience on Facebook.

With nearly half of the U.S. population using Facebook, it is only natural that most radio broadcasters have attempted to engage their audiences in some fashion on this social media platform, despite some hesitation about building traffic on a site that may be difficult for them to “monetize.” From an audience development perspective, there is little doubt that Facebook has potential to help radio stations deepen their engagement and offer greater access to their listeners—provided stations become competent at harnessing this potential. As a result, we have seen most radio stations establish at least a basic presence on Facebook in the past few years.

Engagement requires much more than simple presence on Facebook, however, and it is not clear that most stations are genuinely connecting with their audiences on Facebook. Indeed, it is possible that many station messages are falling on deaf ears—either skipped over entirely, or just missing the mark in terms of touching the audience in a manner that furthers listening or deepens the bond between the station and the listener. Worst case, some stations may actually be putting off their audiences on Facebook through poorly designed pages and inarticulate posts that diminish their brands.

This “Quick Look” report will outline our findings based upon our investigation of one major market Alternative radio station’s Facebook efforts and offers a number of take away points.

FACEBOOK IS THE CENTER OF MANY LISTENERS’ DIGITAL LIVES

The average Facebook user spends 55 minutes a day on the site. Facebook users tell us they “live” on Facebook—they describe having the site open on their computer or the app active on their smartphone for four to six hours every day. While they are not actively using the program all that time, most check their News Feed for five to ten minutes every hour or so.

Because Facebook is so central to their digital lives, they expect to find most of the content they are looking for on Facebook. They resist having to “leave” Facebook to find something on a station’s website. If they want to hear a station’s audio stream, for instance, they would expect to find that capability on Facebook. They expect to hear about station concerts, events and promotions on Facebook. Indeed, they feel that Facebook is much better than an ordinary website for features like reminding them of upcoming events and sharing photos of station events and concerts.

These consumers perceive that station websites serve a purpose, albeit a different one than Facebook. They see the radio station website as a place to stream the station (since they currently cannot do so on most station Facebook pages), read music playlists, view concert and event calendars and search archives of morning show material. For many of these consumers, Facebook and the station website can complement one another, provided the station recognizes the best use of each medium.

THREE PRIMARY DRIVERS CAUSE LISTENERS TO “LIKE” A STATION ON FACEBOOK

Most listeners like stations on Facebook because they see that a friend did. A few will search out a station’s Facebook page, assuming it will be there, but noticing that a friend likes the station is a more prevalent motivator. The three main reasons listeners like a station are to feel connected, to display their affinity and to participate in contests or promotions.

Listeners suggest they like a station simply to feel a part of it, to be “in” on what is happening there. Certain brands have developed enough equity with consumers to prompt liking without the need to give anything in return, such as a discount or promotional offer. In-N-Out Burger, for example, has generated nearly two million likes without offering any coupons or discounts whatsoever. Consumers just want to be close to this brand. The same sense of connection holds true for the popular Alternative radio station we studied in this instance.

Listeners also like the station in order to show off their affinity to their friends. Facebook users define themselves by the people and brands they like, and quickly like radio stations that they perceive add to their self-definition. Listeners put the radio station in the same category with other “affinity” brands like sports teams, car brands, clothing and certain retailers.

In addition, Facebook fans like a radio station to participate in specific contests or promotions. In the case of this Alternative station, many fans recall liking the station in order to buy tickets to an upcoming concert before members of the general public.

POSTS ABOUT MUSIC, CONCERTS AND EVENTS RATE HIGHEST

Fans rate posts about concert information, new music and events most highly. For concerts, station Facebook fans are most interested in show details, ticket sales and ticket giveaways. Music-related posts that fans find most appealing are those that include free song downloads or streams of new songs.

In contrast, Facebook fans do not respond favorably to posts encouraging them to tune in to the station to hear a new song at a specific time. Such posts are more likely to encourage fans to search for the song elsewhere, such as YouTube, rather than tune to the station at a specific time.

On the other hand, fans highly rate posts encouraging them to listen for concert ticket giveaways at specific times. The difference appears to be that fans do not want posts to include unnecessary hurdles. If you would like them to hear a new song, play it for them on Facebook immediately. Asking them to tune in to hear it is asking too much. Asking them to tune in for a meaningful giveaway, however, is apparently not such a hurdle. Fans seem to be running a quick “cost-benefit analysis” in their heads—if a contest prize is something significant and important to them, the post and the invitation to listen is of interest, whereas a minor or unimportant offer is not.

Fans also feel that posts related to station events are quite helpful in two ways. First, fans appreciate being reminded of relevant station activities. Second, the Events tab is a convenient means for users to stay on top of those events and to see whether other friends are going.

Fans find this feature much more useful than station calendars on their websites.

Morning show posts related to guests, recaps or podcasts are much less interesting to most station fans. Interestingly, many station Facebook fans see a distinction between what they would like to see posted on the station page and what they would like to see on the morning show's own Facebook page. In general, the station's posts should stay focused on music, concerts and events with very little from the morning show, whereas the morning show's posts should stick to the show's content without the need to attend to station business.

That is not to say that the station should never post morning show information, nor should the morning show avoid posts related to the station. What is necessary is the proper balance, with most of the station's posts related to its primary image (often music) and most morning show posts focused on its central theme (entertainment). Morning show posts on the station Facebook page serve an important promotional purpose, of course, even if they are not the primary interest of station Facebook fans.

Stations should also note that the effectiveness of a post cannot be judged solely by the number of comments it receives. Indeed, the majority of posts we evaluated with a high number of comments scored rather poorly. Fans of an Alternative station suggest that they care little about comments of others since they do not see other station fans as their true "friends." Moreover, they resist commenting themselves because they dislike the string of responses that would draw from other commenters.

Finally, as one might expect, posts with nothing more than sales-related pitches rate poorly. Thus, a post that only offers a call to use a product (for example, "Find a good plumber on yp.com!") is not appreciated by fans. Commercial messages embedded in otherwise relevant posts, on the other hand, are certainly acceptable to fans and do not detract from their evaluation

of any posts. A post announcing an upcoming concert that includes a commercial sponsorship by a soft drink, for instance, is well within the expectations of fans, and these posts generally rate highly.

FACEBOOK USERS DECIDE WHETHER TO READ POSTS BASED UPON THE VALUE OF THE SOURCE AND HOW INTERESTING THE HEADLINE

Do consumers read every post they see in their News Feed? How do they decide what to read and what to quickly scroll past? Consumers suggest they look, at least briefly, at most posts that come through their News Feed. They make a quick, spot judgment whether they will read a post in any detail based upon the value of the friend and the gist of the text. When talking about a real person, “value of the friend” means the listener feels close to that person (i.e., he or she was in their close circle of friends in high school, not merely an acquaintance) or has found his or her previous posts to be interesting. When talking about a business, value means they really appreciate the business, rather than one they like simply to get a discount or enter a contest.

Most businesses that a user likes for reasons other than discounts or contests have a fairly high level of credibility to start out with on Facebook. After all, the listener has already expressed interest by liking your station. Nevertheless, users will make a judgment about your station’s Facebook credibility after seeing a handful of posts. Will your station develop a reputation for posting relevant, compelling information, or will your posts be seen as re-prints of press releases from the marketing department, something to quickly skip past?

If your station gets over this early credibility hurdle, most listeners will pay attention to a post upon seeing your logo. The second piece of the equation to determine whether users will actually read your post is their snap judgment of the headline or first few words. If the station

has presented a short, provocative headline, there is a strong likelihood fans will read the post. Photos and videos add to the allure of any post. If the listener sees a long paragraph (or only the beginning of one because they are viewing your post on their smartphone), they are much less likely to read on.

AN ENCOURAGING NUMBER OF FACEBOOK FANS PERCEIVE THAT THEY LISTEN TO THEIR FAVORITE RADIO STATION MORE SINCE LIKING IT

Most Facebook users do not remember any particular Facebook post from a radio station off the top of their heads. Nor do they recall seeing something on Facebook and immediately turning on the radio station to listen at a time when they were not otherwise listening. In their view, Facebook does not have that effect on their behavior. They do not robotically do anything based upon seeing a post on Facebook, much like they never changed their behavior quite so overtly based upon hearing a station promo or seeing a billboard. To suggest that a station can generate more “appointment listening” through Facebook misses the point of how Facebook engagement works—more often through subtle, indirect relationship-building rather than hitting listeners over the head with something and making them listen.

On the other hand, about a third of the station Facebook fans we interviewed suggest they do in fact listen to the station more since liking it. They listen more because they are reminded of content that is of interest to them—an interview with a celebrity they care about on the morning show the following morning, a new song from an artist they like or a concert ticket giveaway.

These savvy consumers cannot be gamed or manipulated. If your post announces that a new Foo Fighters song will play at exactly 7:20 the following morning, these listeners are more likely to go

to YouTube and find the song right then rather than be prodded into listening specifically the following morning. The cumulative effect of hearing about something of interest on the radio and seeing it again on Facebook, however, leads to greater penetration into the consciousness and may convert to more listening. Stations should not think of Facebook as a place to drive an immediate behavioral response (except for a rare highly valued contest or concert), but rather as a relationship building medium. The value of social media is less about listening this moment and more about why consumers will like the brand in the long term.

MANY USE FACEBOOK ON A SMARTPHONE MORE THAN A COMPUTER, LOSING SOME FUNCTIONALITY

Facebook reports that about a third of active users currently access the site through a mobile device. More than half of the Alternative radio station fans we interviewed use Facebook on a mobile device more often than on a regular computer. It is noteworthy that currently much of the functionality of Facebook is lost to smartphone users. While they can see their News Feed, for example, Tabs are not visible to them, and many are not able to like anything on their mobile device.

This is important for two reasons. First, stations that are putting content on additional tabs are likely missing a good portion of their Facebook audience. Second, the size and length of posts may be making them difficult for their audience to read (or easy to skip over). Any post longer than 20 words is likely to be truncated on a mobile device. While mobile Facebook applications are likely to improve in the near term, it is important to stay focused on how fans are consuming your content there at present.

THERE IS AN EXPECTATION THAT YOUR STATION WILL BE ON FACEBOOK

Most radio station fans expect that their favorite radio stations will have a presence on Facebook. Facebook has become so central to their digital existence, not having a Facebook page would be akin to having no business telephone. Many fans suggest that they would assume that a station without a Facebook page is in some sort of business trouble, likely to be changing formats in the near future. In the words of one user: “I feel like everyone’s on it, so it’s kind of an obvious thing.”

ONLY A THIRD OF FACEBOOK USERS ARE ALSO MEMBERS OF THE STATION DATABASE

Finally, we found that only about a third of the Alternative station’s Facebook fans are also members of the station database or listener club. Thus, stations cannot assume that their messages are reaching their “core fans” through any individual new media device—whether that be Facebook, Twitter, email newsletters or texting. Today’s fans use a variety of media, and the fan base of one may not be overlapping with the base of another.

On the other hand, Facebook fans who are also members of the station database do not want to receive the identical message on Facebook and by email message. This underscores the challenge of designing unique messages in each form while at the same time reaching all of your fans through the specific media they choose to use.

TAKE AWAY POINTS

Understand why listeners like your station and what they expect from you on Facebook.

While this study of the fans of an Alternative radio station suggests they like the station to feel connected, show off their affinity and take advantage of contests and promotions, that motivation may vary by radio format and demographic. For example, listeners to a Soft AC station may not be motivated by an interest in showing off their connection to friends, but might prioritize coupons or promotional opportunities. Similarly, this study reveals that Alternative fans are most interested in posts about music, concerts and events whereas fans of stations offering other formats might take a greater interest in entertainment news, gossip or other topic areas. Understanding the motivations and interests of your particular audience is critical to successfully engaging fans on Facebook.

Make deeper engagement—not “appointment listening” or generating comments—your goal.

Although about a third of fans indicate that they listen to the station more since liking it, that additional listening does not appear to be the result of posts containing direct calls to listen at a specific time. Rather, the process of generating more listening is more subtle, the product of deeper engagement with the listener and low-key reminders of particular elements and events worth tuning in. Contests with prizes of great interest to the fans may add listening as well. Overall, however, the notion of generating direct “appointment listening” through Facebook or other social media seems misguided. A more attainable and sustainable goal is deeper engagement with the fans that will ultimately lead to more listening.

Nor should posts that generate substantial numbers of comments be the goal. While such posts serve a secondary purpose—unlocking the viral potential of Facebook because comments appear in the News Feeds of all of the friends of your fans—in and of themselves such posts are not highly appealing to your mass audience on Facebook. To many fans, they are irrelevant since these fans do not care what other listeners have to say. To others, they are an irritant because commenting generates a flood of notifications in one's inbox.

Keep messages short and provocative and check posts on a mobile phone for length and readability.

Fans quickly determine whether they will read a post based upon credibility of the source and the first few words. They have little patience for lengthy posts. Thus, short and provocative posts are essential, perhaps including a short headline, catchphrase summarizing the type of post (Concert-Info) or inviting introduction. Since a large percentage of fans are viewing these posts on a mobile device, check each post on one of these devices for length and readability.

Stations should consider streaming on Facebook.

An overwhelming number of station fans indicate they would like to stream the radio station on Facebook rather than being required to open another browser and go to the station website to do this. The availability of a stream on Facebook itself makes good sense to the consumer since they have already made Facebook the center of their digital life and do not want to leave to take advantage of other services.

Cross-promote various new media platforms and offer explanation of how these services can be used.

Listeners make use of different new media offerings from your station, and there may be little overlap between each of the user groups. In this study, only a third of Facebook fans are also members of the station database. Stations could benefit from cross-promoting other offerings on each platform. For example, database members should be asked to like the station on Facebook with an easy link to do that. Not all Facebook fans of the station are aware that the morning show has its own Facebook page. Station fans should be encouraged to like the morning show and vice versa.

What's more, there appears to be a good deal of functionality on Facebook that many fans are unaware of. For example, tabs that include playlist information or Events are not uniformly familiar to users. If valuable, these offerings should be promoted within Facebook and explained to users. The same holds true for many of the features on stations' websites that have not been fully promoted or explained to users.

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