

JAYE ALBRIGHT

What's In It For The Listeners?

Over the course of a 45-year broadcast career, Jaye Albright has held just about every radio job imaginable – major market programmer, personality, manager, researcher and consultant – but her contributions to the industry are so much deeper than the positions she's held. It's hard to imagine anyone has been more thoughtful, more insightful or has mentored more programmers and air talent than she. It's also hard to imagine anyone with more passion for this format, and for radio, than Jaye.

Spending an hour talking to the 2008 Country Radio Hall of Fame inductee is an education in itself. Country Aircheck recently caught up with her on the road – where else? – during a client visit to WYCT/Pensacola, FL. Our thanks to GM Mary Hoxeng and PD Kevin King for sharing Jaye with us.

CA: You spend a lot of time researching Country radio listeners and have access to additional research. What are some of the current trends you've identified?

JA: We're now in a phase that comes along every seven to 10 years, when crossovers are occurring. When fans hear an Uncle Kracker on their Country station, they don't seem to mind that at all. They love *Crossroads* on CMT and the idea of seeing Brad Paisley riffing with John Mayer or Peter Frampton. Country listeners really get that and appreciate it. Most of their friends aren't country fans, so it's like a secret they want to let them into about something that's really good.

But now, when we've got Lady Antebellum, Taylor Swift, Keith Urban and now Jerrod Niemann being picked up by multiple formats, the core Country listeners have taken note and don't like it. Hank Williams, Sr. dealt with the same thing with "Your Cheatin' Heart", and I know that happened with Dolly Parton with "Nine To Five," Shania Twain and Faith Hill. I don't think the fans have ever liked it when they cross over. It's an ownership thing. Listeners really enjoy it when other artists like Darius Rucker come *into* country; they're delighted to have him in the format. At a West Palm Beach concert, it was interesting to see the young-skewing audience grooving to all his country songs, and yet when he does Hootie & The Blowfish material, they didn't know it. You watch Jimmy Buffett perform for a packed house of Parrotheads, and when he does "It's Five O'Clock Somewhere" with Mac McAnally, the whole crowd goes crazy. And you think, "These folks must all be listening to Country radio."

The Country audience is not that crazy about Taylor Swift crossing over; it causes a bit of negative polarity. But it's great for her to go on

recently and counted 30 artist pictures on his wall. There are more artists touring around visiting stations today than I've seen in many years, and more regionals trooping around with independent artists than I've ever seen before. You look at this group of autographed photographs with their "thank you for taking time to meet" notes, and, in my humble opinion, it's a bunch of sound-alike artists or groups. I asked the PD, "Could you tell me what makes this person different?" The answer was no.

You would think new music would be the antidote to the repetition issue, and yet there's a sameness to what's being pushed at radio that I know listeners don't embrace. It's not that they don't like it; they can't tell the difference. What you want to do is build a star who's going to be able to tour and draw crowds. The smart stations are cherry-picking and adopting certain artists and trying to build them into stars, and that's the right thing to do. But the trouble with that is that if one station adopts someone and another adopts another, we don't have the national penetration that is still important to make what you would define "a hit" and a superstar.

What are some of the key programming issues that you see for Country radio?

We do an annual consumer road map study in which all our clients in the US and Canada participate. If you had asked the listeners 20 years ago, or maybe even 15 or 10, "What are the reasons why you choose one Country station over another?" the top two reasons were always, "The station plays the best songs for my taste" and "The one that plays the most music without too much talk and interruptions."

We've seen a trend over the last few years where "the best songs" still wins. People still

The other commonality is social networking. Look at any Country station that's doing double-digit shares, and then look them up on Facebook. They're going to have 20,000-35,000 Facebook friends. The average Country station maybe has 1,000 or 1,500. And maybe they have voice-tracked middays and 7-midnight is syndicated. So I would just say, "Hey, radio. Something is going on here. Listeners want to be engaged, converse and have a dialogue and be part of a community." If we don't do it, we'd better. Luckily, there are a lot of Country stations that still do it, and they're doing really well.

The reason why other Country stations aren't doing it is because this has been a tough economy, and it's not getting better. There are people who want to buy and sell stations, and, to a large degree, that will solve this problem. In spite of bringing 40% to the bottom line, a lot of big companies can

that tweet the title and artist of every song they play, so every three minutes they're sending you a tweet. What are they thinking?

The right way is to communicate with listeners and listen to them. They want to communicate to us, and if all we do is shout at them, we're sending them away. What we should do is listen and converse with them. Ask them things, they'll reply, and then thank them for the reply. Give thanks for that reply on the air, so what you're doing is inviting them to the dialogue and getting their help in creating the compelling content, the sense of immediacy of what's going on.

Integrate that social network into what you do as a new platform for the entertainment that you create; [it's like] engaging people in 3-D. So your Facebook, Twitter and MySpace, very simply, have to be as entertaining as the station if you hope to use them to brand and market it. If all you are doing is hyping and selling me, I'm not going to be your friend; I'm not going to like you. If your radio station makes a promise, your Facebook presence better deliver.

What's your sense of PPM at this stage of the game?

It's an immovable force coming our way, and it's good. It's far better than the old system, by and large, except, of course, the sample size is way too small. And as a result of the sample size being small, there are really some huge flaws in the system in terms of reliability. There are too many panelists per household and not enough households, so the geographical representation for the panel is not as good as it probably needs to be. Arbitron is trying to fix it, but it's a process where you've got a panel that [runs] as long as two years in the US and three years in Canada. Fixing problems is an evolutionary thing because they're going to have about an 8% movement within the panel month-to-month.

But you have to say, when you look at it under a microscope, as I have, by and large, that it is [measuring] real radio usage. It looks believable, it's people living their lives, and the great news is that radio is so deeply integrated in them. Other media talk about how younger people don't use radio anymore and that radio's reach is nowhere what it used to be because of



ALWAYS MAKE IT ABOUT THE AUDIENCE, ABOUT THE LISTENERS, THEIR LIVES AND THEIR VALUES.

the MTV Awards and basically self-identify as country. It's smart, savvy and I know we all appreciate it a lot. On one hand, you welcome it because it's improving the image of country outside the core, which has got to be good for us long-term. And yet the core's not comfortable with it; they don't get it and they don't like it.

Do crossovers have any other impact as it relates to radio?

The CMA study has shown two years in a row how one impediment to fans listening more to Country radio is repetition. And when these artists are all over the band on other stations, they hear that as a lot more repetition.

A complaint of Country listeners we've always heard that many of us tend to deny is, "You play that same song every hour." But in markets where there are three or more Country stations playing much the same list, it is possible if you dial around a little bit to hear the same song once or even twice in an hour. So to deny their reality is to deny what's going on for them.

There's another aspect of the repetition: the sameness of sound. I was in a PD's office

want to hear the best music – the ones they like most – a lot. That's what drives your usage of radio today for country fans. But the latter is not true anymore. It's no longer quite so much a music quantity [issue]. Instead, it tends to be, "DJs who sound like friends, who relate to the music and keep me updated on things I'm interested in." And in a way, it's ironic to see this happening at a time when radio is becoming more and more voice-tracked.

Isn't that a problem?

Yes, and it's a huge one. There are two things that are success factors of the over-performing, big Country stations – certainly among our clients—and in general, as well. One is that they still have jocks who relate to the local community. Look at stations that do better than the national average for Country shares, and a commonality is that they're local and deeply involved in the community. They have people who personify and bring the brand to life – not just in one or two dayparts, but across the board. Most Country stations aren't doing that, but the ones that do, do well.

barely pay the debt service. If people could get out from under the debt they have and somebody new could buy a station at a reasonable multiple, we'll start seeing radio get back to a local service. I think most people know what we should be doing.

Everybody talks about using Facebook and Twitter. How well do you see stations integrating social networking to maximize its value?

I see a lot of folks using it the wrong way, as if it's like a liner card or a promo telling people about what you're going to do. I also see stations

new media. The great news about PPM is that it proves the lie in all of that. Radio's reach is huge, and young people still use radio a lot. Radio and television are the big media dogs. What other medium can say, "Our average consumer is with us more than three hours every day"? The People Meter shows we're still ubiquitous. When it comes down to out-of-home, there's just no medium that has the impact, power and depth of radio. That's what's exciting.

How do you regard PPM's impact on Country radio?

The advent of PPM has been really good to Country in markets where there's only one dominant Country station with a low ethnic population. But it's not been so good to Country in markets where there's multiple Country stations or where there's a very high ethnic population. That's a big concern. In some markets, where Arbitron is having great

station that plays the most minutes of things that listeners don't care about, like promotions, hype, hard sell and commercials, is not going to do as well.

As I've consulted over the years, managers have said, "Can you prove to me 10-12 minutes an hour of commercials is about as many as a successful Country station can run and still generate good time spent listening? Show me." And, of course, in diaries, the data is not down to the micro-level enough to be able to really believably do that. Look at the TSL of a station that runs 15 minutes of commercials, and the TSL of another that runs eight. You can kind of see it in diaries. But in the People Meter, whether it's a commercial or a promo – non-interesting, non-entertaining anything – the minute you're trying to sell somebody something, probably 40% of the audience is going to go away. And you can prove that.

that the bigger we make things, the bigger impressions they're going to have. But the truth is that the more powerful you can say it, in fewer words, and the more you talk like a real person rather than talking like a disc jockey, the better you're going to do, whether in PPM or in a diary market.

We're seeing a lot of air talent adjustments taking place in PPM markets.

I was a personality for 30 years, and was as guilty as anybody of being too corny, too self-involved. I talked too long and forgot to engage the listener. The message I have learned from PPM – and if you apply it you can see it works in diary markets, too – is that the station we all work at is WII-FM. Those call letters stand for "What's in it for me?" If you approach the listener with that in mind, if everything you do is listener-focused and starts by telling them what's in it for them about what you're going to talk about, it's all good. It works.

out ways to build values-based commonalities that unite them all.

Look at Brad Paisley as an example of how it's done: Tell stories about your life. Sometimes they're emotional, family-oriented, about kids, relationships, sometimes tongue-in-cheek-funny, poking fun at yourself. Then, like he did with "Water," invite your fans in to contribute the pictures and videos of themselves doing things in the water, so that when they go to the show, they see themselves as part of it. That's what I mean by "What's in it for me."

What you want to do is create a community of people who connect and share with one another through your station and through all the other things your station has today: loyal listener clubs, VIP clubs, insider clubs, Facebook pages, video blogs – all of that.

Utilize everything to bring people together, let them tell their stories. Interact with them, engage with those stories through every tool you've got and then put the best of that on the radio. Always make it about the audience, about the listeners, their lives and their values. It sort of gives the feeling, "If you want to know what people who like Country music in this town are all about and what they're like, this is the only place to connect to that."

Would it behoove stations, especially morning shows, to tier or layer the people on the air to span those three different life-groups?

Yes, I think so. Although the good news is that there is a lot of similarity in the values of all of them. An amazing development is how conservative the Generation Y group is – it's very family-oriented. So really, bringing people together and thinking of them as a listener family works really well for all of them. That's why St. Jude and Children's Miracle Network have always worked well for us ... helping other people, finding needs and standing up for what people care about. That works big-time and unites everybody.

What are the key traits of successful PDs today?

You need to be a leader, a manager and a communicator. And you also need to be a terrific time manager – someone good at prioritization and who never wastes time working on something that isn't going to achieve your goal. Once upon a time, that would not have been even in the top five skills a PD had to have. But you do today because there are so many demands on people's time. You also have to be a delegator and understand how to make people accountable once



Changing Stations: Albright (r) with WYCT GM Mary Hoxeng and PD Kevin King.

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difficulty getting an ethnic/non-ethnic sample balance accurately reflecting the population through these small PPM panels, we're going to begin to see Country [or multiple Country stations] as not viable anymore.

How much of what you have learned from PPM about programming to listener behavior translates to your diary market clients?

Everything, actually. There's really only one thing that isn't transferable, and that's the way PPM credits quarter-hours versus the way diaries do. In PPM, you should overlap quarter-hours with your spots. The right thing to do is to minimize the number of commercials in every quarter-hour as much as you can in PPM. The first three minutes of every quarter-hour aren't critical to have an average-quarter-hour, because you need five. So you want to put together five minutes of listening, and it doesn't have to be contiguous in PPM; it can be just any five. Other than that, to me, everything is the same.

The biggest lesson of PPM is that people don't like commercials, and clutter makes people change stations. Duh! The truth is that the station which plays the fewest commercials and is the most entertaining, with a mix of personality, music, fun, contesting, information and relatability, is going to do well. And the

[Arbitron VP] Gary Marince said, and I believe this, "PPM, if folks will pay attention to it, is going to make radio better." And it will. But we're going to be dragged kicking and screaming into that because old habits die hard.

There seems to be a much larger emphasis on brevity.

You've got to keep in mind that the average occasion of listening is a lot shorter than we ever believed it was in diaries. And yet anyone who really thought about it knew that was right. The idea that what we see in diaries – six or seven quarter-hours as one point of listening for people in cars driving to work as the way they [really] use radio – the truth is that it's not real. The average length of the [listening] occasion is somewhere between 2-11 minutes, depending on how heavily the person uses the station. If you build everything you do to, say, within a 2-11-minute period, you're going to get everything I want to you to know about my brand. You'll do well in diaries and PPMs, too.

As you think about all that, you begin to realize what a genius Bill Drake was. Because really, everything he taught his jocks in the '60s is about PPM-friendliness. A lot of us in the '80s and '90s forgot that stuff as morning zoos began to proliferate. We tended to think

If you're talking with an air talent, or with a programmer about talking to talent, how do you convey "What's in it for me" radio in a real-world context?

In some ways, the answer to that is how you do Country. Most other formats, other than maybe News/Talk, have about a seven-to-10-year age target they're talking to. You can clearly define the values of a certain age group and be able to tell, whether it's a Top 40, Classic Rock or whatever, exactly who they are. Most of us are really good at talking to our own generation. Those of us who are 45+ really "get" boomers and understand how to engage and relate to them; they know what boomers' lifestyles are like, what their priorities are, their worries and all that stuff.

The challenge with Country is that we've got three generations within the target audience now. Let's say our target is 18-49 or 25-54. We have almost exactly equal proportions of the 15-29-year-olds – a large group of the population called Millennials, and then we've got the Gen X'ers, which is a smaller number in the population, but they're right in the center of our target – 30-44. And then you've got the leading-edge boom, which is another large group in the population, turning 55 at a fairly rapid clip every year. So we've got to figure

you've delegated to them to make sure the organization is heading in the right direction and getting things done. That's because the organizations we're managing now are bigger than they ever were before and we have more things under our responsibility.

The other things – coach, mentor, recognizing talent, rewarding and challenging them and helping them to grow and to recognize what good content is and isn't, teaching people how to develop and create it, and developing and creating it yourself – the old skill sets are still necessary, too.

Are you excited about radio today as when you got in it?

Oh, my gosh, yes. There's something liberating about hitting what you could be called retirement age. I could actually stop now, really. But I still want to do it because it's still fun, still great. Then, of course, there's my own personal story of gender issues and the industry being so supportive of me. I'm the poster child for *carpe diem*. There are a lot of really good things happening in our music right now and there are some wonderful people. It's fun to see it and fun to be cheering them on as they do it. **CAC**