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Aiming at Ears to Reach Hearts & Minds

THERE HAS always been something unique about the way people react to sound. Maybe it's because our earliest ancestors could hear the peal of thunder or the lion's roar before either danger became visible.

Perhaps it's because our hearing remains acute while our vision can become less so as the light of day fades to black. If I had to pick one reason, though, it would be the unparalleled ability of sound to engage the imagination. Simply hearing the crash of a wave, a soft whisper, or a piercing siren will produce images in your mind more vivid than anything man or machine could manufacture.

*If you know how
to exploit its strengths,
radio can be the best way
to ensure that your
message is heard.*

Radio producers have known this for years, of course, but this often underappreciated medium has played a larger role in public interest advertising than you might guess.

Over 80% of the nearly \$1.1 billion dollars in broadcast

time donated to the Ad Council in 2001 came from radio stations. Bearing this in mind, I contacted Jeffrey Hedquist, one of the

most honored producers of radio commercials in the US. My main question: how can good causes make the most of this medium? As expected, he gave me an earful.

► Jeffrey Hedquist has produced thousands of radio commercials, and while the vast majority has been for commercial companies (*see box*), he makes no distinction when the client is a nonprofit. “You need to catch the audience’s attention,” says Hedquist, and that overarching principle guides his work. No matter what the product, service, or cause, Hedquist believes every successful radio ad does the following:

It passes “The Five Second Test.”

“Read the first five seconds of your commercial out loud,” Hedquist recommends, “then stop and ask: would you continue to listen to this commercial? If the answer is no, go back and rewrite your opening.” One of the cardinal sins of radio advertising, according to Hedquist, is the belief that listeners will wait around for the commercial to get interesting. Those first five seconds are your “audio headline,” and if that doesn’t grab them, the rest of your finely crafted verbiage won’t matter.

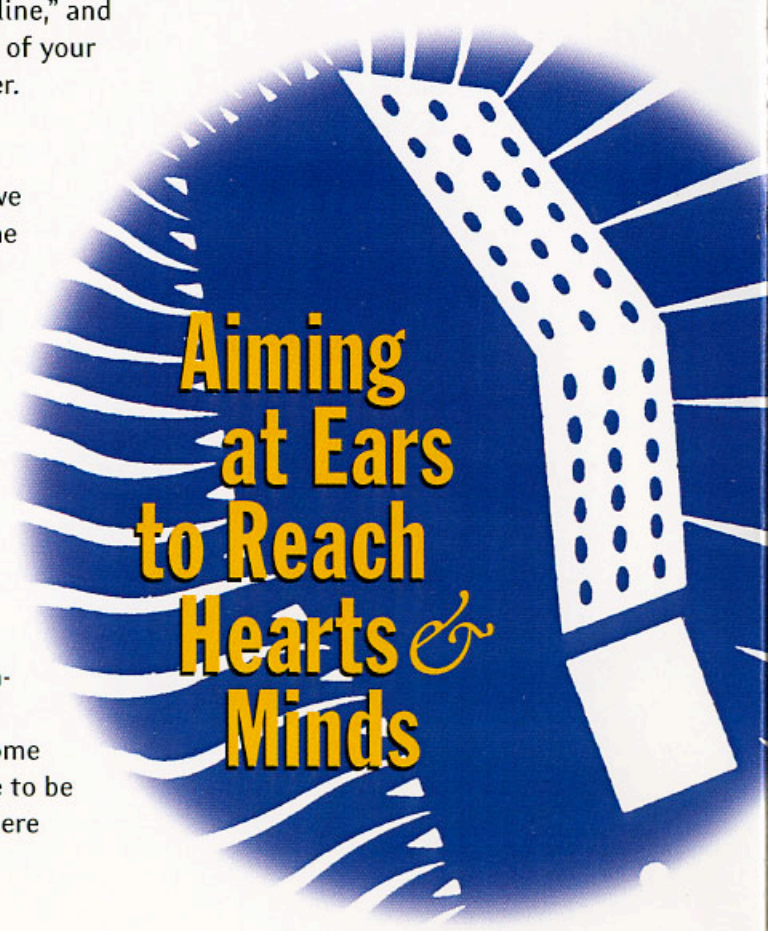
It tells a story.

People love stories, and the ones we love best somehow involve us. “The most listened to radio station in the world is WIIFM—What’s In It For Me,” says Hedquist, and any commercial that tells a story which answers that question will pull listeners in. “Good stories are driven by conflict,” he adds. “If everyone is agreeing, it sounds more like a commercial and there’s no real interest.” Stories also rely on characters that go through some kind of transition. “Even if it’s a single voice,” Hedquist says, “there should be some kind of movement. It doesn’t have to be a huge emotional catharsis, but there

should be change. That gives motion to the story and pulls the listener along.”

It’s written for the ear.

This may sound like a Blinding Flash of the Obvious for commercials intended for radio, but Hedquist finds that he must constantly reinforce this point to the producers he teaches through his seminars and columns. “The best way to write a script is to talk into a hand-held tape recorder,” he asserts. By capturing the rhythm of your own natural speaking style or by transcribing the conversations of others, writers will recognize that people don’t talk with perfect punctuation, and in conversation they frequently interrupt, talk over, or completely ignore each other. Natural sounding dialogue may look terrible on paper, but it’s one more quality that listeners naturally gravitate towards.



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It uses radio's four "primary colors" in unexpected ways.

Whether you're an advertising legend or a neophyte pounding out his first page of copy, you've got the same four elements (or colors, as Hedquist calls them) to work with: *voices, music, sound effects, and silence*. The real trick, says Hedquist, is using and combining these colors in ways that surprise and engage the listener. For example, in a commercial for Splash Mountain, a water park whose primary audience is young families and teens, veteran producer Dick Orkin gave the starring role to a spunky grandmother who, despite her years and creaky voice, couldn't wait to go. If his client is a hip nightclub, Hedquist says he may turn to polka music to shake up listeners and get them to pay attention. And Hedquist asserts that silence, though immensely valuable, is the least used of the four colors. "If you want something to stand out," he says, "have everything stop and just whisper. It shouts louder than everything else in the commercial."

If it's funny, the humor is intertwined with the message.

Another cardinal sin, says Hedquist, is producing commercials where people remember the comedy and forget the sponsor. Humor works best when the comedy flows from the marketing concept behind the *entire* commercial and is not an independent piece that can stand by itself.

As an example, Hedquist points to Newport Creamery, a chain of stores in the Northeast that sells ice cream (for which it is renowned) but also serves

The Hedquist Story

IF YOU don't recognize the name, you'd probably recall the voice, because Jeffrey Hedquist has performed voiceovers for McDonalds, Ford, Time-Life, Cingular and many other national radio and TV campaigns.

Hedquist Productions (based in that media hotbed, Fairfield, Iowa) has clients in 44 states and has won nearly 700 awards, including Clio, International Broadcasting Awards, NY Radio Festival Awards and many others. National clients include Goodyear, Sunbeam, The Body Shop, and the American Heart Association.

Hedquist's expertise is widely recognized within the radio industry where he is a featured columnist for *Radio & Records*, *Radio and Production*, *Small Market Radio Newsletter*, and the e-zine *AdGenius*.

breakfast and lunch (for which it is not). To build the breakfast and lunch trade, Hedquist's company produced a campaign featuring a helpful, albeit dim-witted local who persistently calls the stores to complain about "incorrect" newspaper ads that say Newport Creamery serves eggs, sandwiches, etc. The spots were funny and built the business because the humor and message were inseparable.

It makes one clear point.

"If you throw three balls at someone, they'll drop them all," says Hedquist. "But if you throw them one, they're more likely to catch it. Want your listeners to catch the ball? Give them one strong, simple idea." ■