The Five Tenets of Great Radio
Sometimes, Radio Sucks...

Don’t believe it? Turn on the radio and just listen. Within 10 minutes, you’ll find yourself irritated by a commercial. Guaranteed.

Why is that? Why do radio commercials tend to grate on our nerves? The answer is simple: advertisers don’t understand the medium.

Since radio is audio-only, listeners respond to it differently than any other mass medium. Because so many people listen to radio (93% of all adults a week,) it continues to be a strong platform for advertising.

So how do we use it properly? How do we take advantage of these remarkable numbers, and create radio advertising that engages the listener, instead of irritating them?

How do we filter out the suck?

We follow five simple guidelines. The Five Tenets of Great Radio.
Entertain First...Sell Second

If you’re an AE, your blood pressure just went up a couple of points. Sorry. But ask yourself—why do you turn on the radio? Now answer yourself—to be entertained. So why should the entertainment end when the commercials begin?

Entertainment is the price of admission into the listener’s consciousness.

If your client’s message is going to be heard, the listener has to be quickly convinced it’s worth her time to listen. No small task, but the best way to do that is within the framework of entertainment.

Does the spot have to be thigh-slappin’ yuk-it-up funny? No. It just has to engage the listener and draw them through to the end.

It’s too easy to please the client at the expense of the listener. Radio has a history of being lopsided in this regard. Several copy points strung together and delivered by an innocuous announcer is always a safer bet for approval than presenting the client something out of left field. But to make radio work, we must seek the approval of the listener, and convince the client to go with it. This is better than doing it the other way around.

The only way to successfully engage a listener is to give them what they came for—entertainment!

Entertainment! Here, John O’Hurley pulls us in with a fabulous adventure. It takes a while to realize what the product is...or even that it’s a commercial!

It’s one of those spots that you stay in a parked car to finish. Why? It entertains you before selling you the cheeseburger.
Focus on One Big Idea

Radio’s greatest misuse is when clients try to communicate too many copy points. When we’re writing or producing radio, we’re focused on that spot. When the client is approving (or changing) the radio, they’re focused on that spot. However, when the radio is presented on the air to the listener, he is NOT focused on that spot. Listeners are passive. They’re listening for entertainment—not a bullet-pointed wad of information. If a spot contains three or five or nine copy points, none of them is likely to be remembered. However, if the spot has one clear, simple message, it will be heard! This is a basic concept, but it’s so often ignored.

Turn on the radio anytime, and you’ll probably hear, for instance, a bank spot that crams into sixty seconds their convenient ATM locations, their low interest rates on mortgage refinancing, their friendly tellers, their high-yield certificates of deposit, drive-through windows that are open on Saturdays, plenty of free parking, balloons for the little buckaroos and free checking. All in one spot that reads like an annual report. Sure it gets the bank marketing director’s juices flowing, but radio like that leaves the listener empty—no matter how cool the music track, or how mellifluous the announcer’s voice.

One Big Idea. Just like TV or print, it’s essential to the success of any radio spot. In the grand scheme of things radio is inexpensive to produce. If a client has five big things that must be communicated, do it with five spots. This increases your creative potential, because it opens the possibility of a themed campaign, which increases the shelf life of any given concept. It also dramatically increases the potential for success—both for the client, in their pursuit of customers; and for the agency, in its pursuit of sweeping the radio campaign category at the next awards show.
The development of language was predicated on the need to tell stories. Our children learn to read and communicate when we read them stories. The jokes we tell are simply stories with a unique structure. Stories permeate our lives. Practically everything we say or hear is, at some level, a story. So, why is there such a dearth of storytelling in our radio spots?

When you turn on the radio and listen to the advertising, it typically takes the form of lists—items from the creative brief—bullet points of not-so-fascinating features of a business. “Saint Onan’s Medical Center has the largest number of MRI units in the Tri-State Area, and free parking for families 24 hours a day. Our Manual Labor unit helps do-it-yourselfers bring the little ones into the world on a budget. Saint Onan’s is the hospital for all your medical needs, with combined medical experience of over 3000 years. A tradition of excellence since 1969—Saint Onan’s.”

These points will be utterly lost to a listener’s memory as soon as the spot is over. Why? Because our brains are hardwired to remember stories...not lists. We remember stories because they make a logical progression we can relate to. Stories engage us emotionally by reminding us of something we’ve been through. Stories move us through time—from conflict to resolution, tension to release, question to answer. Thus, they hold the listener’s attention, and stay in their memory. Stories also trigger pictures in our imagination, which is the gift that only radio can offer.
So, do all spots have to begin with “Here’s the story of...” or “Once upon a time...”? Of course not. The best storytelling comes from letting a story unfold in front of our ears. “Honey, have you seen the scissors?” “Excuse me, is this seat taken?” “I never thought it could happen to me, but yesterday...” Stories begin by opening a door into an ongoing scene. A well-written story gives the listener a sense of eavesdropping. A good story engages, entertains and pulls a listener through to the end.

Of course, along the way, the product must be introduced (oh yeah...that), which is why before you begin to concept a story, you must ask yourself why you would use the product, what you would do with it, or what would be the circumstances surrounding your use of said product or service. Do you know any friends or relatives who would use it? What are they like? Do they have any quirks that would make this story come to life? Is there any particular emotional state you would be in when you need it? Is there anything funny you could do with the product or service? Could its use be misunderstood? Questions like this help you concept a story around the product, instead of just awkwardly dropping the product in.

When writers master this technique, they typically run out of room for awards. It’s human nature to listen to stories. Take advantage of that!
When you listen to the radio, does it seem that a lot of the advertising sounds alike? It’s not your imagination. Most radio advertising walks down a safe, formulaic path: single announcer over music; jingle with announcer donut; two voice dialogue with announcer (to fill in points the dialogue couldn’t handle). These three forms make up the majority of radio advertising, and to the passive listener, they’re all the same.

To bring a listener around from passive listening to active, focused listening, a radio spot must surprise them, entertain them, and delight them. If, at a passive level, your radio spot sounds like all the rest, then there’s no chance for even the most well-written content to work, because your listener isn’t engaged. The answer is in the form of the spot.

Radio is a big, blank canvas on which you can paint literally anything. Why constrain yourself to dialogue or announcer when you have such a large, open space in which to play? Consider one possibility as an example: instead of dialogue between two people, what would it sound like if the dialogue were played out on two different answering machines? That’s a form that people aren’t used to hearing. When the form of the spot catches their attention, then the content has a chance to do its work.

What about your dog...what is he thinking? Start a spot with a guy saying “go get the ball Rusty” and let the spot continue in Rusty’s inner voice, occasionally coming back to the clueless owner. Ever been abducted by aliens? Of course you have. Use that experience! Let a campaign take place on an alien ship, starting with the abduction...
and ending with the aliens so excited about your client’s product that they have
to come back to Earth. That’s good for at least 3 or 4 spots. A satirical look at a
television show makes a great tool. A unique framework opens up all sorts of award-
winning possibilities.

This is what we mean by form. The dramatic container that holds the content of your
client’s message. Only by breaking out of the standard forms can we jar a listener
from passivity into active enjoyment of the message.

And, if the form of the spot is outrageous enough, then you have a good
shot at going viral, because people will talk about the spot. This works
especially well with multi-spot campaigns. Introduce an ongoing story into a
multi-spot campaign, and you’re golden!

There are no rules that say you must use dialogue, or that your spot has
to have an announcer block, or even that your sentences have to conform
to any known standard of English! As long as you engage the listener, and
hold on to them through the end, you’ve laid the groundwork for effective
communication. Make the form of your spot stand out, and the content will
have a much easier time doing its work.

If you’re looking for inspiration in creating the form of a spot, try using our
Museware. It’s in the Fun, Free and Useful section of soundscapes.com.

Sounds Different!
Smoking is NOT glamorous. Take sixty seconds to get
this one big idea across to teenagers.

In order to make the spot stand out on the air, we took a
dynamic piece of library music, and wove in the voice. The
result sounds unlike anything else that surrounds it.
We talk all the time in this creative business about imagination. But sometimes we fail to see that the root word of imagination is *image*. An intangible picture formed in the mind. Radio creates those pictures in the imagination in a way that no other medium can match. The reason is simple: the images we get from radio come from our own personal experience.

Think about it. With television, what you see is the DP’s vision of the storyboard—other people’s pictures. With print, you see only what the Art Director wants you to see—someone else’s picture. But when a well-produced radio spot plays, the pictures that come to your imagination belong to you—and nobody else. That’s why well-produced radio stays with a listener long after the media buy is over.

The phenomenon of radio-triggered images can be likened to dreams. No matter with what detail you describe your dream to someone else, they can never see it the way you did. Because your dream is a product of your own mind, only you can own it. And it stays with you.

So, how can you tell by looking at a script whether you have done the job of triggering the imagination? Easy. Storyboard your radio. It doesn’t have to be anything special. Scratch something out on the back of some scrap paper (like the creative brief). Nobody else is going to see it. It’s just a simple test to see if you’ve written imaginative radio...something that will leave a listener with an image. If you can’t conjure up at least two or three images from a script, it’s time to try again.
Radio with no imagination—with no pictures—is ephemeral. It vanishes as soon as it’s finished. Great Radio welds itself to a listener’s memory with colorful scenes, interesting stories, and vivid action.

Paint those pictures with words and sound effects. Underscore the emotion of the story with music. Make radio that people remember. You’ll be doing a favor for your client, your listener, and yourself.

In Conclusion...

Great Radio is vivid, imaginative theater built around the product. Great Radio earns its way into the listener’s consciousness by entertaining first, and selling second...by focusing on one big idea...by telling a relatable story...by breaking from the standard forms...and by leaving the listener with vivid images.

Radio is a medium unlike any other. It’s up to us to better understand how it works, and then make it work well for our clients.
The Five Tenets Cutout

It’s now clear that if we had written this whitepaper in the form of a story, you could more easily remember it.

Alas, such is not the case.

To make up for that, we included this handy cutout version of the Five Tenets of Great Radio. You can tape it to your computer, tack it to your cubicle, or simply dedicate some time to memorizing it—imagine the fun you could be at parties! Works for us.

Print it out and refer to it the next time you’re concepting a radio spot. We guarantee positive results.

And if you want to talk about your radio during the conceptual phase, feel free to call Soundscapes. 501-661-1765. Collaboration is free...what’s to lose?

We’d love to hear from you.
Soundscapes is an audio production company with 25 years experience producing sound for all types of electronic marketing media. Four highly experienced production engineers and four incredibly organized production coordinators work as teams to create award-winning audio for clients all across the United States. All this takes place in four large, comfy studios designed by world-renowned studio architect Russ Berger.

Soundscapes draws its voice talent pool from professional voice artists and actors nationwide. The world’s top music libraries fill the shelves and servers with any musical style you might desire. And if you march to your own drummer, Soundscapes will create memorable tunes for you with an in-house composer and custom music department.

You can contact Soundscapes at 501-661-1765, or e-mail info@soundscapes.com.