

Radio: Still a force to be reckoned with

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Friday, 17 April 2015, saw the second MTN Radio Conference held at Rivonia in Johannesburg. This industry gathering spoke to the radio, advertising and media buying industries on how brands and audiences can connect more meaningfully.

Unlike audio visual content, radio advertising gives the audience an opportunity to let their imagination run wild. The commonly echoed sentiment at the MTN On Air Radio Conference is that radio advertising is akin to "the theatre of the mind" where every sound, each utterance and the tone of voice are aimed at stimulating the mind, which results in the recipient having graphic image-driven on the scenarios that they are able to imagine for themselves. This has made radio one the most effective storytelling platforms, which also forms the foundation for engaging advertising content.

In the past few years, radio has dropped significantly as a communication medium in the minds of marketers and advertisers. Their budgets were largely spent on television and print where they have seen a dramatic drop in viewership over time. The conference speakers and panelists are of the view that radio is a viable option that marketers need to explore more, which boasts large audiences and "people in search of entertainment" as some maintain.

Agencies, media owners and clients need to collaborate

It is clear that media buyers, clients and media houses work in silos and they need to collaborate to create optimised content that resonates with audiences. While it may be challenging for a small community radio station to punch above its weight by engaging media agencies and clients, the bigger stations need to play their part in bridging this gap.

It seems that brands and advertisers are of the notion that one size fits all, where the same message is thought to appeal to different LSMs with insufficient audience research having been conducted, at least that's what radio stations thought at the conference. One of the cases, as later echoed by African station radio legend, Treasure Tshabalala, was that a directly translated advert - from English to an African language - could get a different reaction depending on the audiences it targets.

The parties involved need to ensure that messaging is suitable for their audience, as opposed to what we have witnessed before where a western company simply translated a message and changed the voice-over artist. Radio stations stand to lose out when they play adverts that do not stimulate their listeners' minds because they no longer have to spend time searching for stations as there is a proliferation of them.

A rise in brave advertisements required

There has been a rise of brave adverts where Netflorist, Incredible Connection and ASUS were worth noting. The agencies with award-winning radio adverts maintain that it was the delicate and overlooked balance of a brave brief and clients who wanted to break barriers and who trusted the agencies they worked with.

Brave and entertaining advertising could be the reason an audience decides to stay tuned to a radio station during an ad break, as opposed to skipping stations. In South Africa, Netflorist has produced adverts that keep listeners yearning for more and a lot of brands can learn from this. This brand's ads were met with cheers and laughter at the conference, as people recalled hearing the advert and others did not receive a similar reaction, where the latter translated into lost advertising revenue in a room filled with radio professionals.

Not all is well in radio

Truth be told, it is not as rosy in radio as many would have you believe. Jeremy Mansfield mentioned seeing more and more young people with earphones on and assumed they were tuned in to radio stations. Times have however changed and while this was probable 10 years ago, when young people did not own smartphones, where they could only purchase FM radio devices and listened to 5FM or YFM, this is now no longer the case. The rise of affordable MP3 compatible phones has ensured that the youth no longer have to be subjected to only FM radio.

Listeners are no longer brand advocates where they listen to a single radio station religiously, which could be as a result of the proliferation of community radio stations. Listeners now have an opportunity to tune in to different stations whenever something they do not like is being aired.

Online radio vs traditional radio

The ability to attract audiences from across the globe, as both listeners and brand advocates, has increased the popularity of online stations. Traditional radio in Africa will stand its ground and it will take some time for online radio stations to overtake these mediums due to the high cost of data; unreliable broadband access; the relatively high cost of smart devices and other external factors on the continent.

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