

## **Production: A Real Risky Business**

By Jim Russell

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**There is a real risk in producing programs, local and national – the risk of losing one’s shirt!** When stations embark upon production, the stakes are high. They need to get it right. The cost of failure is steep.

The Catch 22 we’re in is that stations are creating more and more local programming, spending more and more budget on it, in the belief that it is such programming that will distinguish them locally. At the same time, that relatively expensive local programming is either marginally successful or failing with audiences who clearly prefer the imported national programs. How to reconcile these two?

### More Local Programs

Public radio stations are investing more and more money creating their own local and regional and even national programming. In its paper *Local Content Creation*, the SRG said that such programming efforts go beyond satisfying local creative impulses or mission. Increasingly, said SRG, the reasons are strategic. “By producing programming that connects directly with community, the station forges critical ties with the people who listen and give to public stations.” And, said SRG, stations also engage in local programming to create a competitive edge for themselves in a crowded marketplace filled with imported national syndicated product.

### Quality Issues

*But, local stations may not have the ability to produce the quality of programming that audiences will listen to.* NPR, PRI and APM and major stations like WBUR, WNYC, KQED, and others have set the bar very high. *Audiences expect all public radio to be of that quality.* There simply is no audience tolerance for a lower quality “local programming.”

As outgoing PRPD President Marcia Alvar said recently, when it comes to producing programs, “You don’t get any credit from listeners for doing it badly.” And, regrettably, audiences do not give extra credit just because local programs serve local communities.

In his *Sense of Place* research, George Bailey noted "While our respondents generally like the idea of local coverage, the showcase programs too often fail to deliver—even on the selection of topics. Across nine markets, we kept hearing verbatims like “hit or miss” ... “mixed” ... “inconsistent” with reference to the performance of local programming." Even the biggest stations had problems. "Based on the program examples we played in the groups, we cannot say that the stations with greater resources invested in local programming tended to achieve greater consistency of performance," said Bailey. So, as David Giovannoni reminds us, “local programming suffers a double whammy – relatively high cost with relatively small public-service and financial returns.”

## Measuring Success

Stations may also not have the tools or framework to measure the efficacy of their investments in program production. Unlike almost any other business in America, there are no published “norms” to compare one’s performance to (although hints may be found in ARA’s work on average “cost per listener hour” of various kinds of programming.)

## Risky Business

Bottom Line: creating new programming is truly a risky business. As the report *Having it All* on the financial health of public radio pointed out, “an *increase* in (station) programming expenses was strongly associated with a *decrease* in net revenue” throughout the public radio system. According to the report, more than half of the increased station expenses came from local production expense.

*Audience 2010* points out “Stations are now tending to commit to local showcases that are not listener-sustainable ... Yet the audience outcomes of local production are often cruel, and the economics are always brutal.”<sup>1</sup>

## The Solution

Is the answer to quit making local programs? No! It is to do so carefully and professionally, realizing that creating successful new programming is very hard. The stakes are high, getting it right is crucial. The cost of failure is steep. Here are a half dozen factors to consider:

1. Stations need to have a clearer idea of the program development and production process.
2. They need to know exactly why and for whom local programs are being created. They need to have specific goals and benchmarks of success or failure.
3. They need clear mission statements and “bibles” describing the program’s style and form, and other important program decisions that have been made. Stations need to know what their show does that nobody else does, and they need to have the ability to market that difference to their audiences.
4. They need accurate and adequate budgets.
5. They must have a reasonable amount of time to make it and really solid support of station management.
6. The risks must be appreciated: articulated and willingly accepted ahead of time.

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<sup>1</sup> *Audience 2010*, a project of Walrus Research & AudiGraphics, Inc. for the Radio Research Consortium.