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by Annette Griswold
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ADVANCED RESEARCH METHODS: AN OVERVIEW

by Annette Griswold

Science is a collection of successful recipes.
—Paul Valery

Annette Griswold's list of advanced research resources was first published last year by the Public Radio Program Directors Association. Here she expands upon this list. It's a great reference for those interested in asking more questions of their listeners.

—David Giovannoni

The evaluation of audience data is now routine at many public radio stations. Whether it's perusal of the Arbitron Market Report, or scrutiny of AudiGraphics and the Radio Research Consortium information, many programmers regularly study some sort of audience measurement information.

But what if a program director or producer has specific questions that can't be answered through standard reports and analyses? Questions like "What *kinds* of people listen to my station?" Or "What are the *qualities* the host of my series should have?" Or even "What are the *economic ramifications* of certain programming changes?" These and other questions can be answered using the research methods outlined below and by consulting the Guide to Research Vendors on page 3.

Arbitron Diary Review

An Arbitron subscriber may look at actual diaries filled out by surveyed listeners. This can only be done by scheduling time with Arbitron at the Maryland office.

The Diary Review yields actual listener comments, known as "verbatim." Also, you may see how listeners refer to your station. Is your station known as "90.7" or "WXXX"?

Cost: \$600 and up, depending on market size. Available through the Public Radio Program Directors Association.

Consumer/Lifestyle Survey

Radio listeners may be surveyed for their consumer habits, attitudes, and values. The Simmons Market Research Bureau is one company that conducts consumer/lifestyle surveys. Once a year, Simmons asks nearly 20,000 people nationwide questions about their buying behavior, media use, demographics, and attitudes.

National Public Radio distributes Simmons data to member stations, to help them better understand the make-up of public radio's audience. Simmons information would answer the question, "What magazines do public radio listeners read?"

On a local level, the Media Audit conducts similar surveys to define market and customer profiles. One of the big advantages of the Media Audit is that it allows a non-commercial station to quote data about itself and the com-

petition. The Media Audit would answer the question, “Which TV stations do my listeners watch?”

Cost: The Media Audit is available in 40 markets through the Radio Research Consortium, for approximately \$3,600 per year.

Custom AudiGraphics

Custom AudiGraphics offers a station the flexibility to address unique questions, needs, or situations. Perhaps you want to know “How have last year’s programming changes affected listening?” Or “What effect did war coverage have on listeners?” AudiGraphics can be customized for specific time periods — from an individual month to multiple years — to answer such questions.

AudiGraphics can also focus on black or Hispanic listeners; on working men, women, or retired persons; on persons in a particular area of town — any demographic group or geography measured by Arbitron can be the subject of an analysis.

New this year to AudiGraphics is the “Format Imperative” analysis, which classifies listeners by their use of programming on your station. Imperative analysis asks “How important is each major format to the station?” “How well do all formats work together to serve listeners?”

Cost: \$400 per analysis (after purchase of a standard AudiGraphics, which is \$500). AudiGraphics is available through Audience Research Analysis.

Custom Arbitron

Arbitron can be customized to provide distinctive information with FasTraQ or the Q-System.

For example, you could trend a three book rolling average of AQH and come for your station’s news and classical programming, which would answer the questions “Do both formats show audience growth? If not, which one is growing?”

Or, by using the Crossover option (Version 2) in the Q-System, answers to the following questions can be found : “What do our weekday listeners listen to on the weekend?” Or, “What is the crossover between our morning and afternoon news blocks?”

Cost: FasTraQ’s cost can range from \$815-\$1,800, depending on the number of surveys. The Q-System costs \$50 per survey, plus support for the Arbitron diary data, which runs between \$140 and \$300, depending on the size of the station and the number of surveys. FasTraQ and the Q-System are available from the Radio Research Consortium.

Focus Groups

A series of group discussions, each involving 10-12 carefully selected participants. Led by a moderator, the participants share insights, ideas, and observations.

Focus Groups provide information about a station’s image and positioning, and the image and positioning of other stations in the market. (Focus Groups can also be used to zero in on the image of a particular program or series). Focus Groups answer such questions as, “What do listeners think of my station/my program?” “What do listeners think of my competitors?”

Cost: approximately \$15,000, which includes recruitment of participants, cash incentive for participants, fee for a professional moderator, focus group report, and rental of a suitable facility.

Geo-demography

Secondary analysis of Census data, incorporating geographic and demographic information. In other words, data based on the idea that “birds of a feather flock together.”

Geo-demography defines characteristics of specific groups of people (marital status, occupation, education, etc.), and the neighborhoods they live in. Geo-demography answers the questions, “What kinds of people and neighborhoods make up my community?”

One of the major companies providing geo-demographic analysis is the Claritas Corporation, which developed the PRIZM System. PRIZM sorts the nation’s zip codes into 40 “lifestyle clusters.”

National Public Radio uses PRIZM and Census data in a number of different ways. One application is known as MPT, which stands for “Membership Profiling and Targeting.” An MPT analyzes a station’s membership data base using PRIZM profiles, and the results are useful for direct mail fundraising or telemarketing.

Cost: MPT costs between \$500 and \$1000.

Another application is a Site Analysis, which a station can use when determining where a repeater station should go. A site analysis can answer the question, “How does the proposed coverage area compare to our existing coverage, in terms of audience and membership?”

Cost: No more than \$250, from NPR.

Music Testing

A process in which targeted listeners evaluate a large number of music selections. Each music selection, commonly called a “hook,” is several seconds long. Listeners may evaluate a couple hundred selections within a music test.

Selected participants may be core, fringe, members, or any other segment of the audience. The sample size may be one hundred or more people who are invited to listen to the music in a large, comfortable room.

The evaluation scale might include such criteria as tune in/tune out, familiar/unfamiliar, or stimulating/boring.

A music test might answer the question “Which kinds of jazz do listeners want to hear?”

A Consumer’s Guide to Research Vendors

Before you spend money on research, take the time to evaluate the credentials of the company.

For example, is the field service (a company conducting telephone surveys and recruitment/facilities for focus groups) affiliated with the American Marketing Association, and listed in the AMA Directory? Do they have a brochure with pictures and floorplans of their facility, including the number of telephone stations?

Also, does the researcher (often called the research director) have an advanced degree in social science research methodology? Or does she or he have experience working for an established research firm, such as Gallup, Burke, Magid, or Yankelovich?

And last but not least, always ask for a list of satisfied clients, and take the time to check them out.

There are many companies who do music testing. Perhaps the best known within public radio is FMR Associates and their EARS device. EARS stands for Electronic Attitude Response System. Each test participant is given an EARS unit (a small computer) for entering his/her reactions to the music.

Cost for music testing: approximately \$45,000, depending on the size of the sample and the complexity of the project.

Alternatively, music testing can be done by mailing cassettes to a select group of listeners. The music examples may be a minute or two in length, which means that fewer examples will be tested. This method yields far less knowledge than an auditorium test, but is far less expensive as a result.

Cost: approximately \$15,000-\$25,000.

Perceptual Survey

In-depth telephone interviews of targeted listeners. The survey sample is large (300 people or more), and each interview may last 15-20 minutes.

A Perceptual Survey (a large sample) is often used to verify ideas and attitudes expressed in Focus Groups (a small sample). As with Focus Groups, information about a station's image and positioning is gained, as well as information about other stations in the market.

Cost: approximately \$15,000-\$18,000, which includes the hiring of a professional research company to conduct the survey, collect and process the information, and write up the findings. Or, as part of specific projects (large scale and small scale), CPB conducts focus groups and surveys at no charge.

Program Economics

Program Economics asks the question, "How much income is generated by each program or type of programming on the station, and how does this compare to what the programming truly costs?" By posing realistic programming scenarios to members, it can also estimate and compare the relative income risks of potential programming changes.

The information for a Program Economics survey comes from a carefully controlled sample of a station's members, in which their contributions are tied to the programming they listen to.

From this information, projections are made regarding the likely financial implications of programming changes. "Can my station afford to drop program X?" Or even more basic, "Can my station afford to keep program X on the air?"

Cost: \$15,000-\$20,000 through Walrus Research.

Program Testing

A process in which targeted listeners evaluate several programs, program elements, or program prototypes.

As with music testing, selected participants may be core, fringe, members, or any other segment of the audience. The sample size may be a 100 or more people who listen to the test material in a large, comfortable room. The evaluation scale might include such criteria as tune in/tune out, like/dislike, or valuable/worthless.

Program testing might be used to answer this question: "What kinds of announcers do listeners prefer?" Or for program producers "Which opening to the program do listeners find the most compelling?"

Cost: Through FMR Associates and Walrus Research, approximately \$50,000.

Program testing can also be done with the "cassettes by mail" method (see above for Music Testing). Program examples can also be played in focus groups, although this is not standard procedure.

Psychographics

An audience segmentation system based on the theory that there are different personality types and these types predict and explain behavior. In other words, there are psychological characteristics that differentiate listeners' attitudes and actions.

The best known psychographic systems are the VALS and VALS 2 schemes developed by SRI International. VALS stands for "values," "attitudes," and "lifestyles." Individuals are assigned to personality types based on their responses to written questionnaires.

Psychographics answer the questions "What kinds of people are attracted to public radio, and what are their attitudes and beliefs?"

NPR has available a VALS 2 profile of the NPR audience.

Annette Griswold heads a management and programming consulting service based in Greenbush, Wisconsin. The Corporation for Public Broadcasting funded this report. Opinions expressed are the author's and do not necessarily reflect opinions or policies of the corporation.

How To Contact Companies Mentioned In This Article

Audience Research Analysis
David Giovannoni
6512 Sweetwater Drive
Derwood, MD 20855-1337
(301) 869-5177

Corporation for Public Broadcasting
Janice Jones
901 E Street NW
Washington, D.C. 20004-2037
(202) 879-9677

FMR Associates
Bruce Fohr
6095 East Grant Road
Tucson, AZ 85712
(602) 886-5548

National Public Radio
Jackie Nixon
635 Massachusetts Ave. NW
Washington, D.C. 20001
(202) 414-2818

Public Radio Program Directors Association
P.O. Box 988
Olney, MD 20830
(301) 570-0362

Radio Research Consortium
Craig Oliver
Box 6083
Silver Spring, MD 20906
(301) 774-6686

Walrus Research
George Bailey
Box 40
Greenbush, WI 53026-0040
(414) 526-359