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R&R/Nashville

....God save us from these music tests.

You and I have often talked about my disdain for call-out research. Generally, I have high regard for auditorium tests so long as they are properly conducted and they're kept away from meddling executives' micro-management. Which, of course, is increasingly difficult to avoid these consolidation days.

After last week's (Jan 14) issue with the list of Paragon's "dirty dozen", I was shaking my head once again. The methodology for that compilation wasn't identified, but it was a call-out based list, right? Had to be. What other methodology would show "Let Me Let Go" by Faith Hill as the 5th worst song in whatever library list was tested. Let's remember that was a #1 record from a monster album from a #1 artist. And all of us remember the song being promoted as a current with reports of its "great call out scores".

And who would even be testing a dog like "All Lit Up In Love" by David Lee Murphy which showed up as #7 in the 'dirty dozen'? And George Strait's "Round About Way" as the third worst-score?! Another #1 record from the format's preeminent image artist. Puhlezze!

Let me say again, this call-out crap is killing us. Yes, there is the report that fewer than 10% of stations in the format are conducting call out, but most all of the big guys are and all of them report to you and the other charts. And they carry so much weight that what they do infects everybody else with the trickle-down effect.

I was there at the birth of call-out research and have watched this baby grow since it's little head popped out along about '75. Far as I know I am the only person who ever wrote an 'anti-' call out article (R&R/Feb '79). Even then, I knew I would be spitting into a hurricane. People love numbers. They take comfort and solace in them. Numbers are psychologically soothing. It makes no real difference where the numbers came from or how they were compiled, most programmers who have access to them will follow them right over the cliff.

There are a multitude of examples, but let's look at what happened to Country in the two biggest markets. At the old WYNY in NYC, PD after PD failed to get above a 2 share. In the heady, hot days of '93-'94-'95, that's all they could do. The format had, in the past, been a lot higher up the ARB pole in New York. These guys were now researching their asses off, confidently playing *only the best testing songs* and sinking out of sight. Across the land at KZLA the same thing was happening. They gave the helm to the veteran programmer who often takes

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credit for 'inventing' call-out. His numbers told him Bonnie Raitt and the Eagles were more important than Alabama. Irrefutable! It was right there in black and white. Uh-huh. Another failure to move the ARB meter.

Listen, I think call-out can most certainly be a valuable tool in *some* formats. Youth oriented formats, especially. Kids are super-involved in music, highly influenced by their peers. They latch onto a new song or reject it almost immediately. They are strongly loyal to one or two stations. Their tastes are not very broad. They are easy to find on the phone and are eager to take the time to 'do the test'.

Adults, on the other hand are not easy to sample. They don't like being bothered with phone call solicitations of any kind. Yes, most certainly Country fans are loyal, but they are adults. They have broad tastes. George Strait fans may well enjoy Manilow. Springsteen or polkas. Adults have a lot more 'stuff' in their heads. Kids' synapses have, at best, a few hundred tunes stuck to them. Adults have thousands in the multiple. They like a lot of things on a lot of different levels. I've talked with an Alabama junkie who's all time favorite song was "Fly Me To The Moon" by Sinatra. Researching and rating Country music with the call-out methodology is a gigantic task. I venture to say a nearly impossible one.

I think it is well to note that Edison Media does not offer call-out research. Currently, they are the most respected radio researchers in the business, the one hired by the CMA for its recent massive study, the one that partnered with Arbitron for the in-depth examination of internet radio. I once asked Edison head Larry Rosin why he didn't provide call-out, it being a hugely profitable core product for his competitors. "*It would be too expensive to do it right,*" he answered. "*We don't do short-cut research.*"

Here's an example of what he means. A good friend of mine recently took the programming job at a very sick major market station. The only Country station in the market and it hasn't been above a 2 share in years. The station's call-out was being done by one of the biggest, best known firms in the business. The PD soon started noticing the strangest things. Songs that had been on the air less than six weeks, songs he felt were developing into valuable hits often showed a high burn score. On the other hand, he saw songs that had 650 to 800 plays showing virtually no burn at all! How was this possible? It didn't make sense.

He inquired and was told that since his new market was a 'difficult' one to sample, they were taking anyone who professed to listen to Country for one hour a week or more. P3 listeners counted just as much as P1s. So, one week "You Had Me From Hello" might look great, the next week the numbers would suggest throwing it into the trash can. All the PDs in the stations immediate past had

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been continuing to use these numbers, apparently interpreting them in some manner and applying the scores to their music decisions.

Amazing. And not uncommon. I have worked with clients who've done the very same thing. I ask *why did you drop that record?! It's requesting top 5 and selling strong!* "The call-out is bad." They might re-add the song a month or six weeks later after it reached Top 10 in R&R. Or, maybe not. I've seen people hang on to stiffs beyond all reason because *"the scores are good."* Then, six months later in an auditorium test, the score would rank it and reveal it as the dork it always was. Then it would be dropped...after (now) nine months on the list. I could figure it up. A 3:45 song times 700 plays equals 43 hours and 45 minutes of detrimental, wasted airtime. That is just one song. Multiply that times eight or twelve others on the list at the same time. And some say, "How come our numbers aren't better? Gee, the music Nashville is giving us sucks. "

The solution to this is quite simple. First, the person making the music decisions in the station must absolutely be a stone cold Country music fan. (The fact that so many in the business now are not is a whole 'nuther matter.) Second, remember the two most important indicators of a records programming value are a) requests and b) sales.

Our core listeners have been telling us for years now (years!) that they are dissatisfied. The primary bitch: *Too much of what you play ain't Country.* But still we keep diluting out lists, playing all this Pop/Rock that is precisely what they are complaining about. Why? Partly because of what I point out in the paragraph about adult listeners above. And also because Pop P1s who listen to the Country lightly are included in the samples. Those people will more naturally rank Pop songs higher and Twang lower. Does anyone doubt that this music mix is a major factor in the precarious health of the format at this moment?

The bottom line is this: The music director must have passion for this music, must pay attention to what the listeners are talking about and asking for and must watch what they are doing with their music money. You learn a lot more by being immersed in the culture and observing what's going on than by trying to gain knowledge through some dispassionate pseudo-scientific 'research'. All call-out is fraught with errors. Not just some of it. All if it.

Regards,



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