

Technology platforms create a new radio star

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East Coast Radio's pioneering drive into creating new content based on complementary technology platforms is delivering an entirely new radio star - impacting on the station's listenership profile, advertising revenues and the skills required from jocks and sales staff.

"A radio station's primary asset is its relationship with its listener community, a relationship that is becoming increasingly interactive as listeners become more comfortable with generating content across other platforms. Our station offering to advertisers has in turn become far more multimedia focused, delivering a far richer bouquet for media buyers where they can access traditional broadcasting products along with outdoor billboards, online promotions, blogging, podcast and so on. In turn, we are creating an entirely new radio creature that is also demanding a far broader skills base of jocks and sales staff," says Trish Taylor, CEO of East Coast Radio.

"With the advent of blogs, a jock's most redeeming features are no longer just a great voice and sharp mind. We need radio presenters who can write well. While we are not looking for masters English students, we are looking for presenters who can create great content on air and online. In essence, it's all about 'Radio 2.0', a whole new ball game that has entirely changed our portfolio of offerings to clients and our recruitment strategy when searching for jocks and great sales people," says Trish.

East Coast Radio has invested heavily in its online capabilities and the results have paid dividends. The stations blogs are regularly rated as the top blog sites in the country by Amatomu and recently swept the board at the SA Blog Awards, clinching five out of six of the nominated categories. The podcasts are equally as successful, providing an additional advertising revenue stream for the station and a database of some 50 000 unique visitors to the station's website - the direct marketing opportunities for both the station and its advertisers are mind blowing as long as its handled in line with the legislative parameters of permission-based marketing.

"We now have a platform for live audience interaction with thousands of listeners at any one time rather than just a handful who might make it through on a studio telephone line to air their views. Now great radio content survives beyond the allocated three-hour slot on air - it can be downloaded by literally thousands of people and get sent around the world. Topping and tailing the pod casts with an advertiser's message also adds a new revenue stream. The digital and mobile space has had a huge impact on show content and programming which has become far more interactive and immediate in terms of content reflecting exact consumer sentiments," explains Trish.

But more critically, East Coast Radio's foray into the multimedia space has had an impact on the aspects that matter most to shareholders and investors. Listenership figures have grown where others have dipped and the station reported a revenue growth of 17% in the Kagiso Media group's 2007 financial results, bucking the overall downturn in the industry. The station also remains one of the top three radio stations in the country based on its share of ad spend revenue.

Recruitment in this new space remains a challenge for radio owners countrywide. "There is not enough skilled radio people in the market and our training institutions and varsities are not in touch with how dramatically the medium is changing. Tertiary institutions are simply not geared up deliver the new age graduate that is in demand by radio stations. To meet this need, we have developed our own talent academy to scout for new talent and train and orientate promising individuals around this new version of radio," explains Trish.

This skills shortage extends to the sales front too, where entirely new financial models have emerged that require sales people to not only be at the forefront of technology trends, but able articulate these benefits and excitement of the evolved radio model to clients. Cheryl Wheeler, East Coast Radio's Sales Manager says their sales execs go through rigorous

training and mentoring with immedia, the internet strategists and architects responsible for East Coast Radio's online presence.

"We are constantly exploring tactical opportunities for our clients that incorporate radio, print, outdoor and digital media, delivering a more cohesive and synergistic model for clients. This in turn means that sales people need to understand the various technology platforms, how they integrate and how they can be leveraged to deliver maximum returns for clients. We also have a powerful database of over 50 000 bloggers and web users who have provided important information about their listening habits and competition/promo preferences. There comes a huge responsibility from our side as custodians of this database to use it in a responsible manner and still deliver great results for our advertisers.

"For example, we can now quantify that on this database we have 15 000 golfers, opening up the doors to do great e-mail and SMS voucher campaigns that can be redeemed at the local golf shop. While a small business might not be able to afford the costs of a radio campaign, online advertising on our website coupled with a promo is quite viable," explains Cheryl.

"The trends have changed dramatically and today clients want to reach people on different levels. As a result radio has had to grow beyond being a stand-alone medium in the audio space. Sales people need to be able to sell these concepts to clients who are largely unaware of the depth of marketing opportunity that exists. We are working hard on our succession planning to create a new breed of sales person. We actively recruit trainees with a passion for media and sales to learn the ropes of our new marketing platforms and teach them how to sell and package this successfully," explains Cheryl.

From the outset, innovation has always been part of East Coast Radio's DNA. "We will always be an incubator for innovation in radio and have managed to never be distracted from what our core business is. Our five year strategy is to see how we use radio's strength to evolve our company into more of a holistic communications company. The lessons learned is that the century old wireless medium will endure in a complementary relationship with new technology platforms and retain its relevance," concludes East Coast Radio CEO, Trish Taylor.

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