

Radio In Creative Crisis

The father of the Album Oriented Rock format and co-founder of XM

Satellite Radio, **Lee Abrams**, is getting back into the consulting game. “There is a creative crisis out there in radio, TV, and the media in general. So I thought it was a good time to launch MediaVisions, to contribute and help.”

Abrams shares his thoughts with *Radio Ink* on where radio needs to go in the 21st century to recapture the magic and the audience it had decades ago.

Radio Ink: Has radio become monochromatic – white-bread?

Abrams: It used to be technicolor, vibrant, and alive. Now it’s a utility that is about as exciting as the electric company. I think radio forgot what it’s all about, at a time when the competition from other media has become so strong. This is a time when radio needs to be on creative overdrive. Radio is so black-and-white these days, modeled on some ’80s focus group rather than the excitement of 2020.

Radio Ink: What elements need to change to shift radio into creative overdrive?

Abrams: It’s several things. Radio needs to get back in the game and get off autopilot. It has to stop being safe.

Wording: It’s got to have the vibe of the street and not a focus group. Enough with the clichés – “Most Music, Most Variety.” Radio needs to be more street-driven, not focus group-driven and safe.

Production: My god. Radio production is an art form. That’s missing these days. You still hear the big voices bragging slogans. It should be a theater-of-the-mind experience that takes you places. I listen to airchecks from the ’50s and ’60s, and that was magical. I’m not saying to relive that, I’m saying create that same type of magic in 21st-century terms. The magic of sound is missing from radio today.

Features: Stations are still doing “Twofer Tuesdays” and “Block Party Weekends.” Those things were cool 50 years ago, but there hasn’t been a new generation of feature programming for today – things that accent a 24/7 mix that are new and powerful.

Audience respect: That is missing today. A lot of stations try to trick people with things like “The home of” this or that. Nobody believes that anymore; it’s another tired cliché.

Personalities: I think we could use a new generation of personalities beyond the morning shows. Some of them may not even be on radio now – maybe they are on the Internet. There are characters out there who need to have a home on radio.

Completeness: Stations used to have so much going on, from printed surveys to DJs doing cool remotes. A lot of things were going on beyond the music mix that added a whole new dimension to the station.

Owning artists: I remember the days when an up-and-coming artist would go to the radio station and play live on the air. You don’t see that anymore, where stations claim artists. When there is a new release by a major artist, treat it religiously. Get behind it and sell it. I’m not saying do this with every indie artist, but those that are known, get behind them and make them part of a station’s fabric.

Guerilla tactics: You don’t see much of that anymore, like it or hate it. Something like the Disco Demolition, or people being sent underground for a week and playing records. Stunts and tactics that aren’t hokey but generate a lot of attention.

Radio Ink: Content is king in the digital world. How can radio grab that today and make it work?

Abrams: Radio should be in creative/content overdrive right now, considering the amount of competition. It’s not a financial thing; it doesn’t take a lot of money to be small and just do cool stuff. That is what is being done on satellite and online today. That used to be radio’s turf, but radio just gave it up.

Back in the day, when the great stations launched something, it was like General Norman Schwarzkopf planning the Gulf War. You had war rooms where you planned everything out. It was a real mission. Nowadays I see stations just sort of slapping stuff together. Maybe throw up a few billboards, utter some new slogans and a name. In today’s



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environment, it's much more critical to really think and really plan out a station launch or relaunch.

Radio Ink: What type of talent does radio need today?

Abrams: It depends a lot on the format. There are a lot of stations that are liner-oriented. I mean, come on, a liner-oriented Classic Rock station – what can you say about “Free Bird” again? That's an extreme example, but generally speaking, radio stations need to have real communicators, people who can walk you through the programming. Not necessarily talk a lot, but able to tell stories about the songs being played.

Radio needs better, efficient storytellers. I would encourage people to listen to some of the great stations of the past. KHJ in Los Angeles was great at word efficiency. They could tell a great story, but did it in a very condensed and economical way. I'm not suggesting going back to that, but reinventing that on a 21st-century level.

You have to be selective about it,

but there was a time when radio had personalities on throughout the day, not just during morning drive, people that could truly create audio magic. Each daypart has to be special, with a personality. You have to bring back characters.

Radio Ink: What do you think about the way radio handles talent today?

Abrams: There are exceptions, but in general, radio today treats talent terribly. Talent is being treated as a commodity that is interchangeable. A lot of that is self-inflicted – if the talent is doing nothing but reading cards, then maybe they deserve to be treated as a commodity. Overall, I think that the talent today is highly undervalued and underestimated.

Radio Ink: We hear a lot that “live and local” is needed for radio to remain a viable medium. What do you think?

Abrams: I think there's room for both – I think national done really well can be muscular and powerful. National that's generic is terrible. Some formats that are national and without character are a problem. Ideally, a station is totally plugged into its community. That's the best of all worlds.

Radio Ink: Like it or not, “big box” radio is here to stay. Is that good or bad as we mark 100 years of radio?

Abrams: I think it's bad; they are making a lot of cutbacks and compromises. It's really not all that healthy for the industry. The thing is, we are not going to return to the days of mom-and-pop radio. These big companies, despite the economic pressures, have the potential to create magical radio. It's just a matter of how they think.

Radio Ink: Do listeners really care about who owns what and who pays to keep the lights and transmitters on?

Abrams: No, they don't give a damn. If anything, it works negatively and takes away the personalization of radio. It makes listener think they are simply tuned in to a big corporate entity that really doesn't care about them. Generally, listeners don't care, they are just looking for entertainment.

Radio Ink: Is there still room in the business for independent owners, or is that something from the bygone days?

Abrams: There is still room for independents if they can avoid the temptation of getting gobbled up for a lot of cash.

Radio Ink: In many instances radio has become a jukebox, playing overly researched music jammed between overly long stopsets. How does radio get away from that?

Abrams: Stations need to aggressively start thinking about what their function is. Of course there are stations that can do well by just being a jukebox and keeping production values to a minimum.

You know, if you're number one and making a lot of money, you're wonderful. But if you're not, it's time to look at new ways to reinvent yourself. That needs to be driven by hypercreativity and total reimagination.

Thanks to Lee Abrams, MediaVisions; leeabramsmediavisions.com

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