

A PROGRAMMING EXERCISE

What do I want my new program to be?
How can I improve the shows I already have on the air?

"I have this idea for a program!" How often have you heard that or said it yourself? It's easy to think that once you've come up with a great idea for a show, you've already done the heavy lifting. But taking a blip on someone's creative radar and making it into a successful program requires hard work and discipline. It also demands trust, creativity, ambition and honesty according to NPR Senior Programming VP Jay Kernis who has created an exercise to help producers and hosts "take the temperature" of their show's hosting, production and editing. Using a basic question-and-answer format, Kernis has used the exercise to start shows from scratch, to redefine shows that need a new direction or just need a little tweaking.

History of the Exercise:

The programming exercise is based on the experience NPR went through in 1979 to create Morning Edition, and the process Kernis and Scott Simon used five years later to create Weekend Edition; "We sat at a table for some six weeks and asked each other questions and answered those questions. I considered the challenges of both of those experiences and boiled them down into this exercise. It's simply a series of questions that touch on fundamental concepts."

This is a summary of an exercise Kernis did at the 2002 PRPD Conference with Doug Fabrizio, Host and Executive Producer of RadioWest, a daily local talk show on KUER, Salt Lake City. RadioWest launched in 2000 as a magazine with reports, feature stories, interviews and commentary. One year later it was changed to a call-in program covering local and regional issues. At the time of the exercise, Fabrizio had a full time producer who helped develop show themes, select and book guests and part-time help to handle callers and run the board. Whenever possible, the program opens with a produced report.

This summary is highly edited – see **Full Question List – Kernis Programming Exercise** for a complete list of all questions that were posed.

How the Exercise Works:

The exercise is highly customized depending on the show involved and the full exercise generally takes about three hours. Kernis sits across from the producer and asks a series of questions that are divided into "chapters" such as:

- The purpose of the program
- The tone and style of the program
- The host
- Subjects covered in the program
- The values of the program (including the PRPD Core Values)

The producer is given a blank card to take notes on each subject area. Every time the producer agrees with a question, the producer writes that response on the card. For example, Kernis asks "Is your program a place for diverse opinions?" If the

answer is yes, the producer is asked to write "diverse opinions" on the card. By the time the exercise is done, the producer has a written record of the aspirations and goals for his/her program for each of the "chapters" that have been covered during the exercise. Kernis says the cards become what he calls "guilty souvenirs". Remember that phrase – we'll come back to it later.

Exercise Excerpts:

Kernis began the exercise by asking Fabrizio a series of questions aimed at finding out how RadioWest defines what it is and is not. Here's a sample:

Kernis: If I were to ask you, what is the one most important goal of this broadcast...if you were sitting in my office and saying "Here's the pitch. I'm going to sell you on the one reason this show deserves to hear the light of day", what do you say?

Fabrizio: It explains this place. It explains local culture to the people who listen.

Kernis: It explains local culture?

Fabrizio: It explains who we are.

Kernis: Explains who we are?

Fabrizio: Yeah

Kernis: I'll buy that.

Kernis: Let's discuss the purpose of the program. I just want you to say things out loud honestly. Don't look at my face and think I'm leading you somewhere. I'm only trying to get you to talk out loud. If I say something you agree with, write it on the card. The purpose of the program...a source of in depth-discussion?

Fabrizio: Yes

Kernis: A place for diverse opinions?

Fabrizio: Yes

Kernis: A source of breaking news?

Fabrizio: No

Kernis: A place to meet newsmakers?

Fabrizio: Sort of

Kernis: What does sort of mean? You don't have to be. I'm just asking you, is that what you think you're doing?

Fabrizio: To some degree. I mean, the idea is to engage people in conversation...

Kernis: That's not what I asked. I asked will we meet people who are in the news on this show?

Fabrizio: Yes

Kernis: There are some shows on the radio that people would describe as sexy. Do you think of your show as sexy?

Fabrizio: No

Kernis: No one ever says yes in public radio. Now, is RadioWest a showcase for your talent and ideas? You don't have to be humble. It's just us.

Fabrizio: No

Kernis: No? Are you sure?

Fabrizio: What the hell.

Kernis: No? No?

Fabrizio: Well I mean, I think I have a capacity, a skill at interviewing. So in that sense...

Kernis: Well there. We got there very quickly. Yes, you have talent. You want the show to represent that talent. And why are you somewhat hesitant? Is it the room? Is it me?

Fabrizio: I've often said the worst interviews are when the interviewer thinks it's about him or her.

Kernis: Generosity is represented in the PRPD Core Values, yes. But you got there somehow. You raised your hand. Someone said, "Oh, he's got something." The question is, does it get on the radio?

Fabrizio: Yes

The next few "chapters" of questions Kernis asked dealt with other broad topic areas such as the character, tone and style of the program, hosting, topics the program includes or rejects and the values of the broadcast including a discussion of PRPD's Core Values . The conversation also touched on more nitty-gritty aspects of the program's production and presentation. Kernis played this example from RadioWest to "set the table" for a series of questions about how the program frames its invitation for callers to join in:

Kernis: You have just spent nine minutes engaging me with this remarkably entertaining produced piece, Have you given me the best reason to call in - the best reason to stay tuned and to call you?

Fabrizio: Yes

Kernis: You have? Well, your charge to me was to join the conversation. That's the best reason to call in?

Fabrizio: At this point just saying "Join the conversation, share a comment or a question", you're right. Probably not. In my charge to the listener...I'm thinking the way I would have done it now – this show is about a year old – would be specific questions: "What have you heard in the neighborhood? Are there words that you've discarded? As a professional, do you try to mask an accent that was once fairly clear? When you go home, do you speak differently?"

Kernis: So in the year since you've done this, you have gone from the more general to the specific?

Fabrizio: Right. Otherwise you get really nebulous kinds of comments.

Because of the limited time frame at PRPD, Kernis was not able to include a number of detailed questions that he normally would ask about production techniques and practices, such as:

- How guests are booked
- How often the thesis of the show is repeated so the audience tuning in knows what is being discussed
- How topics are focused and drama built over the course of the hour

What Can I Do Better?

The overarching goal of the programming exercise is to make the show better. Kernis peppered the exchange with questions that focused on ways to improve RadioWest and Doug's performance:

Kernis: When you think of the attributes you've written on the card, what elements of your work that if developed or grown would make you better? What can you do better?

Fabrizio: I think we can be better at defining what the show is about. I'm trying to get to a point where I say to the producers, or anyway, the people who work on it, "Okay, wait, wait, wait! What is it about? What's this show about? What's our focus for this show?"

Kernis: Each specific show?

Fabrizio: Exactly. Yes. But we're also engaged in this conversation about what the show is in general. I mean all the questions you asked at the beginning, "What do we want from it? What do we want people to say about it? What do we want that experience to be like? So we're having both of those kinds of conversations – specific and general. But I think that just in terms of day to day, we want to be able to define what this show is about and what is the relevant question?"

Which Leads Us Back to Those "Guilty Souvenirs"

By the time the programming exercise is complete, the producer has a stack of cards filled with notes about each of the "chapters" that have been discussed. This is in essence, a written record of the aspirations and goals for the program. Here's what Kernis says are the real value and utility of the cards.

I have found that after doing 24 -30 of these exercises, that the cards become guilty souvenirs. People look at the cards a month later or a year later and say, "I made this promise to myself. I said I was going to do this or that. And there it is. It came out of my mouth and why am I not doing it? Am I taking the easy way out? Is it a production problem? Is it a staff problem?"

After we do one of these exercises at NPR, we listen to the program with the expectations that have been articulated on the cards and in the PRPD Core Values. We listen and we make notes about all of these things. And then we come back in six months and say, "All right, you wanted to achieve certain things so what did you achieve?"

When we have the time during the exercise to dig deeper about specific subject areas, I go another step and ask, "What subjects are you covering a lot?" And you list those. Then I ask, "What subjects do you really want to cover?" And you make another list. And then I ask who's in charge of your show. And you say, "Well what do you mean? I told you - I'm the Executive Producer." And I say, "Here's what you're doing and here's what you want to do. What's stopping you? Who's stopping you?" And then we look at why. Sometimes it's just easier to do these kinds of pieces. Or you don't have the money. Or you don't have the booker to get the guests. But here on this card is what you're doing a lot of and on the other is what you want to do. So that's also worth asking, and asking yourself. "Why am I not doing what I clearly want to do when I'm in charge?"