Computer Assisted PSA Distribution System

David Hutto

There comes a time in each communicator's career when one wishes he or she had been better prepared. Mine came in September, 1979. Hurricane Frederick, a late season disaster, wreaked havoc on the Alabama and Mississippi Gulf Coast. Eight Mississippi counties were in trouble. Severe tree damage, power outages, and destruction of property and buildings was widespread.

Our office, the Extension Information Services Department, was besieged by requests from county and district agents to tell the public what it should do in this emergency. Prolonged power failures had caused food to thaw in refrigerators and freezers. People did not know what foods were safe to eat or refreeze. Snakes had been driven to higher ground, and downed power lines were everywhere.

We responded as quickly as possible by writing press releases and radio-television spots. We were then set to release these materials to the media. We had to locate the counties which were affected and identify the radio stations in those counties, type the labels for the envelopes, and get the material to the bus station and on its way to where it was needed. The turn-around time for ten news releases, eight radio PSA's, and two television PSA's was less than twenty-four hours. Not too bad, but in an emergency situation every

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hour is vital. One real problem we experienced was identifying the radio stations in the disaster area. This was a problem I felt we could solve.

It was apparent that a system was needed to be developed to identify and select radio stations which would reach specific audience types in our state. Certainly the concept of matching the media to the market is not new. Advertisers have been doing it for years. So why not apply the same principal to extension work? We needed a flexible, fast, and easily updated network which was, above all, efficient. In our terms "efficient" meant being able to reach the most people with the fewest number of tapes sent out, as fast as possible.

First we identified the primary stations in the state. In our terms "primary stations" meant those AM stations that were 1000 khz or below and those FM stations that were 30,000 watts and above, the dominant radio stations in the metropolitan areas, and a few local low wattage stations. All that would give complete statewide coverage—a total of 60 stations.

These stations were surveyed by mail with a follow-up telephone call to gather these facts: The format these stations prefered for public service announcements; the geographical area they served; the music format they used; and whether they would send us a current coverage map. From this information we developed our own statewide coverage map using only our primary stations. We had to fill some gaps by using local stations in some areas, but for the most part, we stuck with high-wattage, regional, and clear-channel stations. The primary stations gave us a quick means of obtaining statewide coverage with the fewest possible tapes duplicated and mailed. These stations became the core of our system.

The nature of extension work requires that we reach various commodity groups in Mississippi. It was a fairly simple task to locate the counties that were heavy poultry, swine, and dairy producers. Mississippi's rich delta is known nationwide as a high cotton producing region. Rice and catfish are also produced predominantly in that area. We learned from the commodity departments and the Mississippi Land Use Center where crops were grown in the state. It became our task to key the appropriate radio stations to cover these target groups. We used a simple coding system for the audiences we wanted to reach as follows:

NE, NW, SW, SE—	extension program districts
1-82—	counties (alphabetical)
B—	beef
D—	delta
DY—	dairy
F—	flood
H—	hurricane
PO—	poultry
P—	primary
U—	urban
S—	swine
SG—	sea grant

We also used additional coding relating directly to the radio stations. These symbols were used to represent the different music formats currently in use:

CW—	Country and Western
EL—	Easy Listening
M—	Middle of the Road
T—	Top Forty
BK—	Block
BL—	Black

Music formats were necessary because we knew that stations prefer spots which blend with the style of music they play. It is also logical that individuals listening to that station will enjoy spots which are similar to their preferred brand of music. So we wanted to be able to discriminate on the basis of music style as well as by geographic and commodity production areas.

With our codes established, we were now ready to proceed to the next phase of our system—keying the stations to the codes we developed. We used the Mississippi News Media Directory, published by South Central Bell as a guide in making our list. *Broadcasting Yearbook 1981* would have served equally well. Both have state listings of all radio stations. After we coded each station according to area, county, commodities, special classifications and music format, we were ready to put the information into retrieval system.

It was at this point that we could have taken many different directions. We chose to use an IBM Systems 6 Information Processor although we had access to a small frame computer and a full-blown Univac with disc drives and more

memory than we could ever use. The System 6 seemed tailor-made for what we wanted to do. It was easily programmed without any wasted time for developing or writing a new program to do what we wanted. We could expand our list, add new information, update and delete, purge, and perfect with ease. Our whole program was stored on one small floppy disc which made it most economical to maintain. Since the system was dedicated we didn't pay for expensive computer time on the Univac. Information was inputed directly on the terminal so there were no cards to get out of order, bend or mulitate. Another asset was the unit's compatability to IBM's mag card system by which personalized letters are a breeze to write.

We started out with seventeen codes, but we could expand to more than two hundred if needed. As a result, now we can access any combination of codes we might need to assist in distributing PSA's. For example: suppose our northeast district had a Brucellosis control campaign and wished to send out a spot series to help in training. First, we would ask the computer a few questions. How many country and western, middle of the road, easy listening, etc. stations are there in the northeast district? We would discover that there are 17 country and western, 11 top forty, 4 easy listening, 4 middle of the road, and 5 block programming stations. Then we could instruct the computer to print labels or envelopes for the tapes and begin production. Since we know that that there are mostly country and western and top forty stations in the district, we can do two versions of the spots and satisfy most of the audience, or if time were available, an easy listening version and a toned down contemporary spot could be produced for the middle of the road stations.

The process of obtaining the information on the music format of the stations in that district takes about two minutes from the time I enter the word processing center.

Another example: The problems we had with Hurricane Frederick spots could have been dealt with swiftly using our new system. We have already identified the hurricane prone counties in our state. By using the code "H" for hurricane we could have envelopes addressed and ready to go in a matter of minutes. Should additional counties need to be included in our list, we would add the county number to the hurricane code for inclusion.

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might occur. However, the system is so fast in producing whatever we need, we have resisted. It seems more practical to store that material on a small floppy disc and use that much-needed file space for slides, negatives, and tapes.

We are still learning the limitations and possibilities of this method of distribution and information storage. Right now the possibilities seem to outnumber the limitations. We are excited about its potential and are thoroughly enjoyng its benefits.

Two people who worked with me on this project who have made significant contributions are Helen Brahan, Information Technician, and Barry Brooks, Audio Technician, Electronic Media Section. This project would not have been possible without their suggestions, ideas, and hard work.