

Making a Change in Information Delivery

Al Powell

About a year ago, we were told that our Washington State University's tape network, which carries our regular weekly radio programming, would be terminated in June. For about 30 years, extension had produced three five-minute interview programs a week, which had been distributed throughout Washington and to other western states through this tape network. When budget cuts forced the shutdown of the network, we were told that the tapes would only be continued if we would pay \$9,400 per year to cover the cost of handling and mailing the programs.

The obvious decision we had to make was whether the expenditure to continue this long-running program would be worthwhile, or if there might be another way to deliver information effectively, but more economically. Due to limited budgets, the only other delivery system that looked feasible was a call-in system. This was visualized as a setup in which stations could call a number to access pre-recorded news stories on an automatic answering device.

We thought we could provide two or three news items with lengths varying from 30 to 40 seconds up to 2 or 2½ minutes, with the tape to be changed regularly. This would provide stories of lengths that would be useful to major market and small market stations, and allow for a mix of subjects.

I found we could provide this service on a toll-free (800) incoming line for line charges of about \$3,000 a year, plus the

Powell is radio specialist at Washington State University.

answering equipment. However, this would only allow Washington stations to call toll-free.

We had two more options: First, for an additional \$200 a year, we could add a local number which out-of-state stations could call by paying a normal long distance toll. Second, we could add a regional 800 line for about \$750 per year over the cost of the Washington line. The region line would add Idaho, Oregon, Montana, Nevada, and northern California. The decision making process about which option to choose will be described later.

Pros and Cons to Consider

There were pros and cons for both our possible program formats. The five-minute interview series was well established, and had excellent air times on some stations. This program also allowed us to go into more detail than shorter formats would. There are few other programs such as this available to stations anymore, so we did enjoy some distinction as a programming source.

On the other hand, the five-minute format is regarded as a thing of the past by many stations; the increasing tempo of radio programming in competitive markets has made it difficult to find five-minute openings in programming. Consequently, there were many stations, primarily in the state's major markets, that either did not use the reports or aired them at undesirable times.

Also, the mechanics of the tape network necessitated a two-week delay between story taping and release. This meant that many stories were usable or could become outdated between taping and release unless watered down to decrease their immediacy. It also prevented the use of most hard news. Finally, the expense to continue the programs would be considerable.

I saw some possible advantages associated with the call-in method of delivering information. We would have flexibility in timing the stories: if a story needed two minutes or more to do it justice, we could put it on the tape and let stations use it or not, as they chose. This wouldn't detract from our ability to put shorter stories on the tape for stations whose news policies wouldn't allow them to run stories longer than 40 seconds to one minute. The timeliness of the stories could be improved by eliminating the two-week

delay. We would be providing something available to all stations in the state, not just those who subscribed to the tape network, and we could localize an important story for stations in one area while offering stories for general use as well. We could also give the phone number to county offices so that they could call in and listen to our news or even rewrite the stories with a local slant for media in their area.

There were some possible disadvantages to the call-in method. These included the possibility of callers getting poor quality phone lines and rejecting the tape, lack of interest, confusion about the service resulting in poor pick-up by the stations, and writing the increased number of stories necessary to supply the tape feeds.

Would the Stations Use the Service?

But the decision about which option we should recommend to our administration also depended on one other, and most vital point: would the stations use the service offered? A news service is pointless if no one uses it. Once this was determined, many of the other questions would be answered. To find out, the simplest and most direct method was to sit down and call the people who made the decisions about programming at radio stations. Since we already had a 54-station client group using our tape network, it seemed logical to call them and explore their viewpoints as to the usefulness of the service we were currently providing versus the option we were considering. A strong feeling one way or another among the stations would influence our decision; if there was no real preference in the industry, then we could make our decision based on other factors.

Accordingly, I sat down and, within a few days, called the stations subscribing to the current tape network. I made sure that I was talking to the person making decisions about whether or not to use our tape programming. In most cases that was the program director, although at some stations it was the news director or station manager. I described the situation we faced and our options, including the way that the call-in service would be operated if it were decided upon. I answered all questions as completely as possible, and in the process gathered a few helpful ideas about running the service and about the kind of equipment to use. An additional benefit was getting to know more of these decision-makers personally, which may have benefits in the future.

Making Contact With All Markets

In total, 31 Washington stations were contacted in this manner. Most of the other 24 stations subscribing to the tape network were in Oregon or Idaho. Washington has only four urban, multi-station markets; other stations are scattered around the state, one or two per town. However, one market, the Seattle area, is now the 16th broadcast market in the United States. Hence, the state has a diversity of broadcast market sizes. The state also has a wide range of agricultural products, making geographic differences important because of interest in news relating to agriculture of each area. Because of these factors, an effort was made to contact stations representative of all markets in the state both for market size and for agricultural interest.

Of the 31 stations contacted, 15 preferred the five-minute taped programs over a call-in system. As expected, these stations were generally located in smaller markets, where formats tend to be more flexible and competition is less intense. In these markets, past experience led us to believe that stations were more willing to break their format for a five-minute time block. I also found that in some of the smaller markets, stations were running these programs in very desirable times, such as morning drive (typically 6-9 am) or during the noon hour. Few of them programmed the reports in evening hours.

Eight of the stations expressed a preference for the call-in format. Also as expected, these were typically in medium to large markets, especially in the Seattle area. Past conversations with some broadcasters in these areas had indicated that most of them have developed "tight" programming that leaves no room for five-minute features or news items, except on less desirable weekend times.

It was interesting to me that nine stations expressed no preference between formats, especially because four of these were in the state's largest markets, Spokane and Seattle. The only common denominator for this was that most of these contacted saw advantages and disadvantages to each format, and simply couldn't state a strong feeling either way.

Most significant to our decision was the fact that all but five stations said they would find the call-in format acceptable and would use it at least occasionally. Of those five, three had mailed responses to an earlier inquiry of ours

which had gone out by letter a few weeks earlier. Their response did not address the question of acceptability, only their preference in terms of "either-or". The other two stations stated a preference for the five-minute format, and said they had experienced problems with poor quality phone lines in the past. They declined to say the call-in format would be acceptable until they had a chance to use it and find out if they had better luck with the audio quality of the phone lines.

The Implications Were Clear

To me, the implications of the survey were clear. Although there were more stations that specifically prefer the five-minute format to the call-in, willingness to use the call-in was almost universal. Since we only have the personnel to produce one or the other, budget conditions alone would dictate a change to the call-in format. It would certainly be hard to justify the additional expense for the longer programs when the less expensive alternative is so widely acceptable.

An underlying consideration which we should also mention is the fact that we didn't own the equipment to support either type of program, so necessary equipment had to be purchased before the existing university tape network shut down. It was self-evident that purchasing one telephone answering and playback device would be considerably less expensive than purchasing the reel-to-reel duplicating equipment necessary to supply a continuous series of tapes to a 50-odd station network. The budget for a staff employee to handle the tapes would be an additional problem. I felt the larger of the two expenditures could only have been justified by a strong preference for the five-minute program, and this was lacking.

My eventual recommendation was to drop the tape network when it expired, and to change to the call-in news delivery system. Since one of my findings was that many stations would seldom use the call-in system if they had to pay long distance charges, we ordered a toll-free 800 line for callers inside our state. The line will also be accessible to out-of-state callers through a local number in Pullman, the university's home. Although these stations will have to pay regular long distance charges, we felt it should be available to them. We considered adding a regional 800 line, but felt

the expense wasn't justified at this point. This decision will be evaluated again later when a track record for the system is established. At that time, it's possible that we may expand the service area.

The message delivery equipment was a separate problem. We didn't want to pay for broadcast cartridge equipment, so we opted to stay with cassettes. This meant we would use a high-quality conventional telephone answering machine, but finding equipment that would do the job was difficult. It had to have 10-15 minute playback time in case of an emergency necessitating a long story feed. It had to have automatic rewind if a caller hung up, and it had to count incoming calls. Additional requirements were high audio playback quality, mechanical reliability, speedy service availability, and ability to handle multiple incoming lines. It was also desirable to let callers record their call letters or otherwise identify themselves after the machine had played its message. A machine capable of all these functions was identified and purchased, after some extensive searching.

We're due to initiate the new service in mid-June, and we look forward to it with some pleasure. Still to be created are promotional pieces to be mailed to stations, and other supporting material. At some future date, I'll submit an updated report with comments about the performance of the system. It's going to be an interesting change for our electronic media operation.