

# 15 STEPS TO A GREAT RADIO AD

**1. Make sure you have the 3 elements of success.** First, you need a writer who understands radio. More than any other medium, radio relies on the talent, skill, and salesmanship of a writer. The best writers are those who have both hands-on broadcast experience and a firm understanding of direct response. And remember that good writers aren't cheap. It's false economy to try to save a few dollars with a cheap script.

Second, you must have (or be) a client who lets the writer write. If you want to do it yourself, don't hire a writer. If you *do* hire a writer, make sure you have one good enough to take the ball and run with it. The best writers will listen to your suggestions, but will do whatever they believe is necessary to sell your product or service. Don't get in the way. Don't write by committee. Stand back and let him or her do what you're paying for.

Third, you must have a production company who can "hear" the script by just reading it and bring it to life with the right voices, music, and sound effects. Don't get in their way either. Listen to their demo real to gauge their talents, but once you hire them, stand back. The only input you should have is making sure the final product "sells."

**2. Give yourself enough time to sell.** Most radio spots are either 30 or 60 seconds. It's easier and cheaper to buy time for a 30. But a 60 gives you twice as much time to make your sales pitch. A 30 will work with simple inquiry offers or for well-known products. But it's almost always easier to make a 60 work. My suggestion: When in doubt, test both. If you only test one, go with a 60.

**3. Focus on generating phone calls.** There's only one reason to run a direct response radio spot: to make the phone ring with orders or inquiries. Absolutely everything in the spot should support and suggest the listener picking up a phone and calling. Don't settle for "awareness." Begin a meaningful relationship with

potential customers by offering free information, a free consultation, a special price, or some tangible reason to CALL NOW.

**4. Keep it simple.** A radio spot goes by pretty fast. It can't be reviewed at will. So radio is no place for laundry lists of features or corporate drivel. Get the listener's attention, make a relevant offer, and generate a phone call. Focus on one idea and drive it home.

**5. Tailor your message to your audience.** As in all forms of direct response advertising, it's a good idea to tailor your message as specifically as possible to your audience. There are two basic kind of radio programming: Talk Radio and Music Radio.

With Talk Radio, your audience has tuned in specifically to listen. Advertising within this format needs to encourage continued listening. It must either blend in to the surrounding talk or catch the listener's interest with informational content. With Music Radio, the music is the attraction but often as background noise. Here, a spot is an interruption. It must jump out of the surrounding clutter and generate interest before the listener turns the dial or mentally tunes out.

**6. Put your selling idea first.** There's a nefarious idea throughout the advertising and marketing industry that Creativity with a capital "C" is our #1 selling tool. It's an idea that leads to clever, funny, and artistic ads that go "kersplat" when they are thrown out into the real world, where people have much better ways to be entertained. It's what I call the "Creative Conspiracy."

In radio, as in all other media, your main selling idea should come first. It should be the star. It should dominate the creative concept fully. Don't give in to the excuse that selling is boring. What's boring is uncreative writers who can't figure out a how to generate calls.

Here's a test: if you can remove the product from the copy and still have a complete concept, you're not selling. Make the product, the phone number, the offer, or some relevant selling idea the main thrust of the spot.

**7. Choose a creative format.** There's no set way to write a radio script, but it helps to have a few proven formats to get you started. Here are six that work well to convey information and lead the listener to call.

*Straight Announcer* — Nothing could be simpler than a single strong voice talking directly to the listener. Not screaming, talking. The copy should be simple, direct, and clear. The announcer should speak as if addressing a single person. But it doesn't have to be a lecture; you can ask questions, too. Have you ever ... ? Wouldn't you like ... ? With the right voice, this bare bones approach can jump right out of the clutter and really grab listeners.

*Dialog* — People love to listen to other people talk, as long as it's interesting. One of my favorite dialog formats is to have one person who knows something about a product or service and another person who doesn't know anything about it but who could benefit from it. One person asks questions while the other relays the offer as well as any important information. And if you use voices that match the demographics of your listeners and speak believable dialog, you'll have what amounts to a referral or a testimonial.

*Vignette* — Start your spot with a short slice of life scene illustrating a problem. Then cut to an announcer who describes your product or service as the solution. If you have time, you might return to the characters in the slice of life to show how the product or service has made things better, easier, more profitable, etc. Of course, you will again return to the announcer for the call to action and 800 number.

*Person on the Street* — Simple to produce and highly believable, the tried-and-true person on the street is a good choice for products with wide appeal. Ask real people what they think about the product. Get them to describe how it's benefited them. Ask if they would recommend it to others. Not all the answers will be eloquent, but hearing real people say good things is the best endorsement you can have. It's also a good format for live product comparisons.

*Testimonials* — Take the person on the street one step further and have people address listeners directly, talking about using the product and praising its benefits. These can be experts, celebrities, or ordinary people.

*Story* — Everyone loves a story. This is difficult to do correctly, especially in just 60 seconds. It takes a plausible, brief plot and an announcer who understands the drama of the situation. Like a good short story, you set up a crisis that needs resolution. Listeners must be able to relate to the situation and see themselves as part of it. And the product or service is central to the resolution of the action.

**8. Write for the ear and the eye.** Who says you can't "show" anything on the radio? It isn't called "theater of the mind" for nothing! Use announcer copy and sound effects to help listeners picture a scene.

For example, if you're selling tax-deferred mutual funds for retirement, don't just read a list of features. Involve listeners by helping them visualize the tangible benefits of a comfortable retirement: "Picture yourself basking on a Caribbean beach, reading your favorite author, and sipping an exotic drink. And you know you can stay here for as long as you like, because for the very first time there's no work waiting for you back home. You're retired. And this vacation will last for the rest of your life." Add the sounds of sea gulls and waves lapping up on a beach, and you'll have a powerful image for anyone who has ever dreamed of retiring comfortably.

**9. Identify your sound effects.** Two things you must remember about radio: you can't see the action, and many sounds are similar. What should be the babbling of a forest stream can sound like water running in a toilet bowl. So make sure you set up the scene properly with narration or dialog. You can come right out and say, "I'm standing next to a stream." Or work the locale into the opening dialog: "This stream's no good for fish."

**10. Use humor carefully.** There are some who would say that a radio spot isn't a radio spot if it isn't funny. Humor is used so often, and done so well by a select group of radio specialists, that it's tempting to think that you should try to be funny in every spot. However, funny and effective are two different things. From a selling standpoint, humor is hit and miss. Often as not, listeners don't think it's funny. And you always run the risk of losing the selling message amid the yuks. Humor is hard to do well and too often backfires, so look for other ways to sell your product or service first.

**11. Establish name identification early and often.** Have you ever talked to someone who gave you all kinds of random details before making a point. Confusing isn't it? It's what newspapers editors call "burying the lead." This is deadly in a radio spot where you only have 30 or 60 seconds to deliver your message. Give the name of the company, product, service, free booklet, or whatever early in the spot. Then repeat it at least three times. Follow the advice of speechmakers: 1) Tell 'em what you're gonna tell 'em. 2) Tell 'em. 3) Tell 'em what you just told 'em.

**12. Bury legal copy at the beginning or in the middle.** Psychological studies on memory show that if you read a list of items to someone, that person will probably remember the last item longest. That means that the most powerful position in a radio spot is the last few seconds. Don't waste it by dumping your legal or disclaimer copy into this time slot. The absolute last words spoken should be the 800 number — not legal copy, not a joke, not a sound effect. End with the 800 number.

**13. Use a memorable, relevant 800 number.** Until radio technology becomes fully interactive, your prospect must remember your number, even if there's a phone at hand. A special 800 number such as 1-800-ABC-DEFG (for a reading program) or 1-800-FAX-BOOK (for a brochure on fax machines) can easily be remembered and dialed. But a good combination of numbers, such as 1-800-456-7000, is also good. And remember to repeat the phone number at least 3 times.

**14. Present a clear call to action.** Obvious? Apparently not, since most spots never get around to telling the listener what to do. A radio spot will only generate calls if, at the end, your prospect can answer the question, "What do you want me to do right now?" The answer should always be to call your 800 number. Don't be subtle. For example, the announcer can simply say, "To request your free brochure on losing weight through better eating, call 1-800-LESS-FAT."

**15. Force a response with a time limit.** Limited time offers are not an exclusive tool of direct mail, they work in every medium, including radio. It's basic human psychology — people don't like to miss out on good deals. So establish a deadline to force an immediate response. Later, if you run the spot again, changing the deadline is as simple as re-recording a few seconds of audio and sending the new spots to radio stations.