

R&R's
Kevin Petersen Interviews Valerie Geller

Creating Powerful Mornings

By Kevin Peterson – Christian
Kpeterson@RadioandRecords.com

Among the many things that have changed in our new age of radio, one thing remains constant: A compelling morning show sets the tone for a great radio station. Geller Media International president Valerie Geller, who has spent the past decade working with more than 500 radio and TV stations in 27 countries, says, “The bulk of the listeners are still in the morning, so the morning show is always going to be the lead car, driving the train, and a strong morning show can only help your radio station. It’s a pivotal time.”

In her new book, “Creating Powerful Radio,” Geller says there’s a way to tell if you have the right morning team in place. She says if you put two “generators” together, they fight for the microphone and it can be barely listenable. If you put two “reactors” together, it’s just boring. But if you find a generator and a reactor, it’s magical.

She defines a true generator as “someone who has a million ideas, but they may not all be good ones.”

Meanwhile, “A true reactor is someone who doesn’t have the ideas, but the minute you give them an idea, they come back and say funny, wonderful things. The reactors are some of the most powerful talent in America. They just need someone who can generate for them. If you get the magical combination of generator and reactor, it works every time.”

Geller says that some of the most basic morning-show elements can be the most important to listeners. “The first thing people want to know when they get up in the morning is, ‘Is my world safe? Did they drop a nuclear bomb in Iraq or Korea?’ After they get that information, then they really want to know things like the weather, which, by the way, is the No. 1 topic on planet Earth, and very important to people.

“They want to know what time it is, even if they have a clock. They still like somebody on the air telling them what time it is so they know they’re still on schedule.

Most programmers have their own formula for a successful morning show, but Geller says it all comes down to a few simple things. “Tell me the truth, make it matter and never be boring.”

The second part of her formula has four variables. First is focus: What do you want to say?

Next: engage the listener. What’s in this for them?

Third is opinion: What do you think about this?

The final point is storytelling. “That’s what makes powerful radio,” Geller says, “When we work with that, we always get ratings.”

Geller also says that humor is key in the mornings, especially natural, organic humor, because life is already hard, and people want to laugh. Self-deprecating humor, when people can poke fun at themselves, is always a plus. She also says listeners love what she calls “talkable topics,” things they can discuss when they get to work.

She says, “When something is in power, five minutes feels like one minute, and when something is out of power, one minute feels like five. It’s not how long a bit or song goes. The question is, ‘Is it engaging, affecting the listener, connecting and is it good?’”

Christian music radio stations handle morning news in different ways. “Don’t think about it as news,” Geller says. “Think about it as stories. News just happens to be stories about stuff that’s happening in your world, and stuff that’s true. You don’t even necessarily have to call it news.”

Geller cites a Frank Magid and Associates study that found there are four things that listeners always care about. Health and personal safety is No. 1, and second is any story that touches the heart of the emotions. Next is money; anything that’s about spending money, saving money or corruption around money is interesting to the audience. The fourth category is transformation, or how your life can be better tomorrow than it is today.

When it comes to putting a show together, Geller says, “We always suggest one story from your own life, something from the news that you would talk about in your own life if you didn’t have a radio show and something you’ve overheard or observed. If you bring in those three things and add that to your show prep, you’re going to have a unique show.”

Besides the ratings, how do you know your show is really a success? Recalling a perceptual study done in England, Geller says, “The Mount Everest of research comments came back for BBC Radio morning man [breakfast presenter] Terry Wogan, when one listener said, ‘When Terry takes his vacation, that’s when we take our vacation, because we don’t like being in England when Terry’s not on.’”

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