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The Essential Findings of AUDIENCE 98

Distilled and synthesized, two key findings emerge from the thousands of facts generated by AUDIENCE 98. If they seem familiar, it's because they so precisely reflect our time.

Public service begets public support.
Public support focuses public service.

These two ideas powerfully and inextricably connect the **reason** public radio exists and the reason public radio is **able** to exist. They engage the positive feedback of the quid pro quo – of doing well by doing good.

Ten years ago, AUDIENCE **88** developed the “**programming causes audience**” fundamentals of public service – the focus of our activities back then. Today, as listener-sensitive income surpasses all other revenues combined, AUDIENCE **98** focuses – necessarily – on the “**programming causes support**” fundamentals of public service.

Like the programming basics of the last decade, these financial essentials will have currency for years to come. This first chapter offers a summary.

Public Service, Public Support

Twenty years ago, pioneer researcher Tom Church observed: “Nobody can buy a **public radio**.” He was right. His brilliantly pithy point – that public radio is subject to the same competitive rules as commercial radio – is as true now as it was then.

Today, however, the rules are getting tougher. Commercial station mega-groups are setting up multiple services in our markets. New technologies are opening up new information and entertainment possibilities. Audience targets for all media have become narrower. Competition for people’s time and attention has become as fierce as the stakes are high.

This year Arbitron begins offering information about listeners’ education in its basic subscriber report, putting our upscale, college-educated audience in easy aim.

These developments point in one direction. **Listeners soon may be able to buy a public radio – or something very much like it – from someone other than us.**

In fact, it’s inevitable. The only question is **when**. Our response lies in our two strengths: the **public service** we provide, and the **public support** that results.

Back when Church was being a wit, public radio could count on comfortable amounts of governmental and institutional support. Network programming was cheap. People were debating whether having a sizable audience was a worthwhile goal. We could afford that debate: listener support was a negligible entry in the ledgers of most public radio stations.

Today listener support is our largest single revenue source. And our reliance on those contributions is growing.

That’s put enormous pressure on public radio development professionals. They’ve responded heroically, in the best way they know how, with a barrage of professional training, improved data management and creative fundraising techniques, fueled by CPB’s Radio Future Fund.

But the most powerful force affecting giving is not in their control. **Programming not only causes audience, it also causes audience support.** Fundraising is always about programming. That’s the indisputable fact of 15 years of research, reconfirmed by AUDIENCE 98.

If more than half of our audience still sits out pledge drives, ignores telemarketing and tosses away mail appeals, it’s mostly because **our programming service is not yet the best it can be.** That leaves us wide open to competition. The new rules make it much easier for us to lose.

For the moment, we have an edge on commercial interests, with a reputation, a history and the loyalty of millions of listeners. But we can’t afford to take any of that for granted.

Our other chief asset is information. Right now, we understand more than any competitor about what draws listeners to our service, and inspires them to give. We can use that knowledge to strengthen our hand – station-by-station, program-by-program – and fortify the public service that primes public support. In fact, our future depends on it.

Information alone can’t assure our success, but information applied is an auspicious start. In these next pages, AUDIENCE 98 helps show the way.

Leslie Peters
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Fundamentals in Brief

Public service begets public support.

- Listeners send money to public radio when they rely upon its service and consider it important in their lives.
- They are also more inclined to send money when they believe their support is essential and government and institutional funding is minimal.
- Listeners who have more money can give more money; however, their reliance on public radio and its importance in their lives exert greater influence over the size of their gifts.
- Public service and public support are linked so tightly that listener support can be used as a proxy for the public service that causes it.
- Public support, like public service, is the product of two factors: the **value** listeners place on the programming, and the **amount of listening** done to the programming.
- *Morning Edition* and *All Things Considered* are both **highly valued** and **widely heard** by listeners. Consequently, they generate almost a third of all listener support.
- Local classical music is widely heard but not as highly valued. While it generates almost a quarter of the listening to public radio, it produces a fifth of all listener support.
- The value that listeners place on programming is based more on its importance in their lives than on their incomes.
- Listeners generally value news over music, entertainment over news.
- Listeners generally place higher value on network programming than on local programming.

Public service causes giving; fundraising efforts trigger it.

- The most powerful way to increase public support is to improve public service.
- Giving is the product of two programming factors (the **value** listeners place on the programming and the **amount of listening** done to it) and one development factor (the **efficiency** with which fundraising efforts turn this into financial support).
- Effective fundraising activities can **raise** giving and gift amounts **above** public service predictions.
- Fundraising practices can **lower** giving and gift amounts **below** public service predictions when they attenuate or otherwise interfere with public radio's service to listeners:
- The vast majority of listeners say that pledge drives are becoming more prevalent and harder to listen to. Half say they tune out or listen less during drives.
- Many are concerned that underwriting has become more prevalent and annoying, and that it may eventually force changes in programming.
- Some say they are less likely to contribute to public radio as more businesses support it.

Public radio transcends simple demographics to speak to listeners' interests, values, and beliefs.

- People listen to public radio programming because it resonates with their interests, values, and beliefs. This **appeal** generally cuts across age, sex and race.
- Appeal can also cut across program genres and format types. Different programs and

formats may appeal to the same kind of listener as long as they stay focused on that listener's interests, values, and beliefs.

- Changes in the sound and sensibility of programming can alter its appeal. When programming appeal changes, so does the kind of listener it attracts.
- Public radio's primary appeal most strongly attracts Americans with college or advanced degrees.
- They are younger and older, women and men of many racial and ethnic backgrounds,

present in numbers that reflect the level of college education in their respective demographic groups.

- For most public radio stations, increasing public service – and public support – means better serving the needs of college-educated Americans.
- But the principle of appeal allows us to serve well any kind of listener we choose, as long as the programming we air **consistently** reflects the interests, values and beliefs of that listener.