

Assessing the Effectiveness of Radio Advertising for Reaching Teen College Prospects

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The goal of this paper is to consider radio listening within the broader context of media consumption patterns to answer the question, “Is radio spot advertising an effective means for recruiting teen college prospects?” In many areas, competition for subsidy dollars has made recruiting by post-secondary educational institutions increasingly aggressive, motivating schools to seek cost-effective ways to reach prospective students. This paper will present a summary of various radio audience analyses within the 12-19 age groups. Listening preferences and patterns among U.S. teens will be examined alongside results from a local media consumption survey of students enrolled in Southern Ohio high schools.

Introduction

The environment in which Ohio’s colleges and universities now operate is increasingly competitive. With ever more options available for post-secondary education and training in the Twenty-First Century, competition for “customers” in higher education is intense. In the state of Ohio, state subsidy has long been based on enrollments. That is, the more full-time students enrolled – the more dollars the institution/campus receives from the state legislature. To build enrollments, Ohio’s colleges and universities have adopted aggressive marketing strategies which include costly advertising campaigns.

More institutions are hiring outside marketing and advertising firms to create and manage their marketing and promotional efforts (Blok, 2003). Marketing consultants advise post-secondary institutions to unify their branding, and to seize opportunities to promote the brand in much the same way that retailers seek to promote their brand (Waerass & Solbakk, 2009). Indeed, many of Ohio’s colleges and universities now mount expensive and comprehensive advertising campaigns in an effort to attract the best and brightest students (Anctil, 2008).

These efforts to promote an institution or campus (or any product, service or candidate) are complicated by the myriad media options and media consumption patterns that have emerged in the past 25 years. Where once media audiences were large, heterogeneous, and somewhat predictable, now they are fragmented, homogeneous and “graze” for media content - frequently scanning various media channels/sources for content that closely matches their interests and tastes. Content is often consumed in small segments, not as complete programs. Audiences find it easy to avoid advertising messages, requiring advertisers to become increasingly creative and resourceful in developing ways to get their messages in front of the appropriate consumers (Ashby, 2007).

Keep in mind that many post-secondary institutions often are trying to reach two separate and distinct audiences: prospective students and parents of prospective students. Then the communication task becomes even more complicated (Harris, 2009). Parents may be reachable through a more traditional media campaign, which includes broadcast television, terrestrial broadcast radio, print and outdoor advertising. Teenagers likely are not reachable using the same strategy (Ferle, Edwards, & Lee, 2000).

In our case, we are recruiting for an associate degree program in the electronic media. Our curriculum includes multitrack recording, digital multimedia production, web design, video production, and content creation for digital media. Our experience in meeting with prospective students and their parents has shown that parents are often unaware or unsure of this field of study and its career opportunities. Their teenage prospective students, on the other hand, “get it.” Majoring in an electronic media program can lead to a wide range of careers in television, music production, film making, video game design, advertising, and dozens of other lucrative media-related fields. Media careers may have more appeal to traditional-age prospective students because they are constantly immersed in media content. Thus we conclude we will need different messages and different media strategies for our two target audiences.

The challenge for us then is how to reach the teen audience, as we strive to get our recruitment message to the audience which will most likely resonate with that message (Schwartz, 1974). Because recent promotional efforts for our electronic media major by the campus marketing department had focused largely on a traditional radio advertising campaign (:30 second and :60 second spots) despite anecdotal evidence that teens do not

consume traditional terrestrial broadcast media, we decided to look closely at radio listening habits among teens to see if this tactic is effective.

The Literature

An examination of the literature on teen radio listening, and in fact more broadly on radio listening in general, is somewhat “conflicted” depending on the source of the research and its intended audience. Reports from radio industry sources often indicate that radio listening shows little or no decline. Aggregate audience numbers have been reported as steady or increasing, and that “*time spent listening*” (*tsl*) is similarly strong and consistent. In other words, this industry literature suggests more people in all demographics groups, including teens, are listening to radio (as one might expect with an expanding population base) and they are still spending as much time listening as they have over the past few decades.

For example, in 2010, *Inside Radio* reported in an online article titled “*Study: Teens give radio 32 minutes a day,*” that “While much has been written about the declining use and relevancy of radio among youth, a new study by the nonprofit Kaiser Family Foundation shows the medium remains a popular source for music and other audio content among teens” (Clear Channel Media, 2010). The selective inclusion and interpretation of audience research is commonplace in the media industry as it helps sell advertising. What the *Inside Radio* article does not report is how radio listenership among teens had actually already declined steadily over the past decade and a half. In 2007 the radio audience research company ARBITRON reported that “*time spent listening*” (*tsl*) among teens had declined 33% since 1998 (ARBITRON, 2008).

A 2012 survey of 41,000 Americans by Alan Burns and Associates received a great deal of coverage in the radio industry press when it was released. It generated headlines in trade publications suggesting that radio is considered a “friendlier” medium and that listenership is steady or increasing (Alan Burns and Associates, 2012). When Burns’ results were presented to the *National Association of Broadcasters’ Radio Advertising Bureau*, it was noted that listeners under the age of 18 reported listening to radio “more.” What was not clear was how radio listening was defined in the study, or for that matter, how much “more” listening had taken place. Keep in mind that Burns is a radio consultant whose business is focused on helping radio stations to increase their advertising revenues; and arming the

sales force with ammunition like “young listeners are listening more” is the stock-in-trade.

More often, radio industry listener survey results tend to combine age demographics together in groups less useful for our particular purposes. For example, we most often find teen listenership reported as “12+” demographics, or “12-34,” or even “12-49” (ARBITRON, 2012). By including teen listening statistics with adults, teen listenership numbers appear to be stronger and more consistent.

The intent of this tactic may be to diminish the appearance of the erosion of the teen audience, as other radio audiences have in fact remained stronger and more consistent. Literature from the broadcast radio advertising industry often ignores the teen audience or includes it with older demographics because the teen audience is viewed as less “sellable.” That is, teens have less disposable income, and are less likely to be legitimate target consumers for many radio advertisers like automobile dealers, furniture retailers, and supermarkets (Radio Ink, 2012).

We find that much of the contemporary literature from the broadcast radio industry is interpreted in a way to reassure radio advertising sales executives and their clients that broadcast radio advertising is still a viable means of promoting various goods, services and candidates. For example, *Radio Insights* reported in November 2012, that “Online listening growth (is) anemic. Maybe even declining” (Harker & Bos, 2012). This article appears to suggest that traditional terrestrial AM and FM broadcasting may well win out over online listening, as if online consumption is a passing fad.

This claim appears to be the complete opposite of much of the research on radio audiences that has not been filtered by the trade. Albarran, Anderson, et. al. found evidence in their 2007 research that “suggests younger audiences are leaving terrestrial radio for new technologies” (Albarran, et al., 2007). In a more recent study by the NPD Group, the trend toward online listening versus terrestrial broadcast appears to be gaining strength. According to an April 2, 2013 article, the NPD research results show that among 13 - 34 year-olds AM and FM radio accounted for only 24% of music listening in the fourth quarter of 2012, while Internet radio accounted for 23%, a 5% increase from their previous study (NPD Research, 2013).

In a particularly relevant study, Enquirer Media surveyed “young professionals” in the Greater Cincinnati and Northern Kentucky area. In that study, young professionals were asked at what age they started researching

colleges, and what sources were most influential in choosing a college (Fitzpatrick, 2012). The results, published in a report titled "MEDIA TRENDS FOR HIGHER EDUCATION," appear to have relevance to our discussion in this paper. Not surprisingly, 84% of the respondents reported they began researching colleges in high school (14-18 years old). However when asked about the impact of college advertising, almost as many (83.5%) of the respondents reported they were not affected by radio commercials in selecting their college. 79% reported they were not affected by outdoor advertising and 74% reported they were not affected by television advertising. Additionally, only 35% of the young professionals surveyed reported they currently listen to broadcast radio through a traditional stereo or player.

In that same study, 58.6% said they were positively affected by print (newspaper and magazine advertising) and 46% said they were positively affected by "digital search, ads and web sites." Bear in mind this study was conducted and reported by a company (Gannett) that is heavily invested in print and online media.

Thus it appears when we sample the available literature on "teen radio listening," we might conclude that radio broadcasters (and their sales forces) see the glass as half full, citing the slowing of the erosion of their listenership base among young audiences. Other sources such as print media and online purveyors of audio content see the radio glass as half empty, citing the low amount of time spent listening and the shrinking fragmented audience for terrestrial broadcasting in general. It appears that teen radio listening is a dynamic phenomenon that may be affected by the moment in time and the location where it is studied, and that research results may be subject to some interpretation.

Our study

In light of the bifurcated results and interpretations of research on teen audiences for broadcast radio, we decided to conduct our own very modest survey on radio listenership among teens in our geographic region. As part of an undergraduate course in media studies, we prepared a short (ten question) survey aimed at the 13 to 19 year-old population in Southeastern Ohio. We sought to gather gender, age and geographic (county) data, along with basic information on whether the respondents listened to terrestrial broadcast radio, and if so which stations they

preferred. Additionally, we asked what types of audio content the listeners consumed, and what other technologies they used to obtain that content.

Our survey was posted on both *Survey Monkey* and *Adobe Forms Central*. An email notice inviting students to participate was sent to all students enrolled on the Zanesville Campus of Ohio University by the public relations department. Emails were sent to media instructors and guidance counselors at area high schools, inviting their students to participate. Respondents self-selected over a period of one month from mid-February to mid-March 2012.

We collected 228 responses from 13 to 19 year-olds. One-third of the responses were from 17 year-olds. The remaining age distribution can be seen in Table 1.

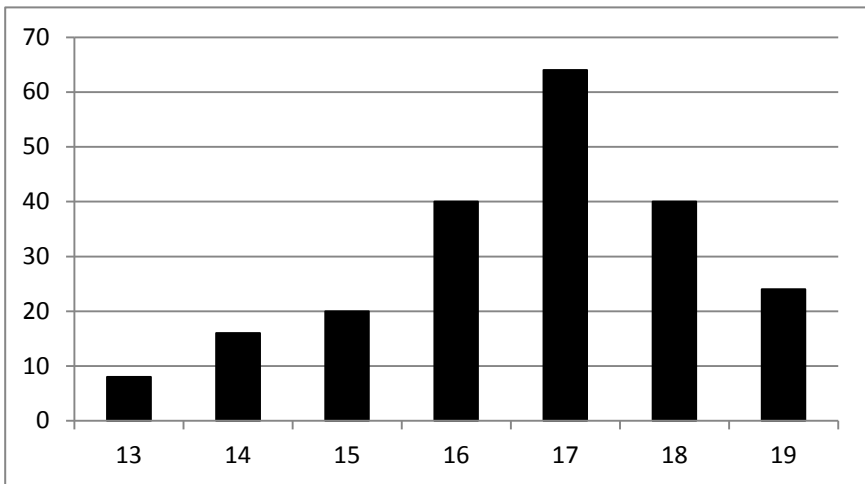


Figure 1- Age Distribution

Approximately one-third of the responses (36%) were from male teens, and the remaining two-thirds (64%) were from females. This may be an artifact more of the self-selection process than of the gender distribution of our target population.

When asked if they listened to “AM or FM broadcast radio,” an overwhelming 73% answered “yes.” At first blush, this appears to counter much of the literature on media audiences, which suggests that teens do not listen to broadcast radio content. It may alternatively suggest however,

that content from AM or FM broadcast stations is consumed – but through other technologies, such as content streamed from stations’ web sites.

Some further evidence that teens consume radio content through non-broadcast sources may be seen in the item in which we asked respondents to identify the device which they used most often to consume audio content. 42% identified the “Smartphone” as the device they used most often to obtain their audio content, the most common response. “Broadcast radio” was chosen by only 10.5% as the device they used most often to get their audio. (See Figure 2.)

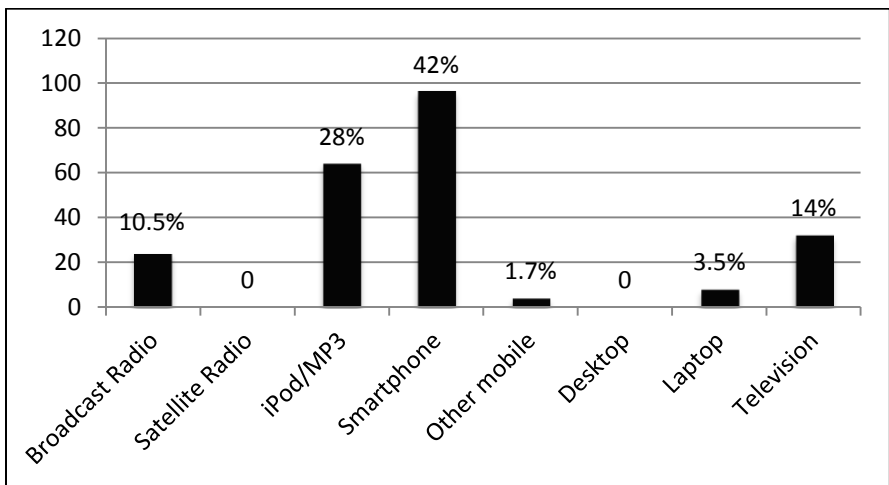


Figure 2 – Device used most often for audio

When asked to select from content types listened to most often (music, news, school closings, weather and other), 75% responded “music.” Approximately 2% responded to “school closings” and 2% to “other.” The remaining 21% offered no response. This is consistent with results from the majority of other surveys we examined; music is the most common type of content sought by teen audiences (McClung, Pompper, & Kinnally, 2007).

Respondents were asked to identify other sources (not broadcast radio) from which they obtained their audio content, by selecting all applicable options from a list of eight. Over 64% identified *YouTube*, 50% identified the Internet, 41% identified compact disks, and nearly 40% identified *iTunes*. While podcasts ranked lowest, with only 8 respondents indicating that they obtained audio content from that source, file sharing also scored very low, with only 16 responding that they received “shared

files from the Internet,” and 12 responding to “shared files from a friend” (See Figure 3).

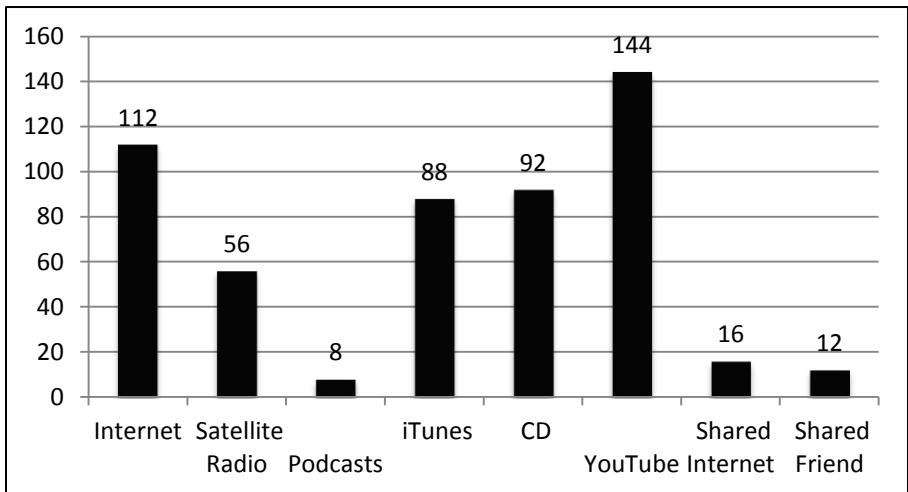


Figure 3 – Sources of audio content

We speculated that file sharing may be somewhat under-reported as a result of some fears of admitting to an activity that many students have been taught is illegal. Campaigns by the Recording Industry Association of America, by schools and colleges, and the headline grabbing reports of criminal prosecutions for illegal file-sharers may have led to discrepancies between what students do and what students say they do. In their article, “Is Music Downloading the New Prohibition? What Students Reveal through an Ethical Dilemma,” Altschuller and Benbunan-Fich suggest that students still engage in file sharing, but regard it as a victimless crime for which they do not want to be caught (Altschuller & Benbunan-Fich, 2009).

Finally, we were somewhat surprised at the number of respondents who identified the broadcast stations to which they listened by the stations’ operating frequency in an open-ended question, “What station do you listen to most often?” Given that most radio broadcasters use their station “name” in their on-air and off-air promotion, we expected to see those in the responses. But rather than responding with “The Mix,” “The River,” “Z-102,” or “QFM-96,” virtually all respondents answered with specific station frequencies (e.g. 102.5, 99.7, 105.9, etc.). This may imply that teen listeners are aware of the stations’ locations on the “dial,” and do in fact engage in at least some of their listening “over the air.” It is also implicit that radio

broadcasters are doing an effective job at branding their stations through the repeated use of their assigned frequencies in their identifications.

Conclusion

While we expected to find teens do not listen to terrestrial broadcast radio, we instead found evidence to suggest that they do still consume content from broadcast radio stations, although their listening is most often done using devices other than radio receivers – most commonly the “smart phone.” The content most often consumed is music. These results may have greater implications for the continued importance of radio for musical artists in gaining exposure for their material, than for colleges and universities using radio advertising to attract students. In fact, according to at least one study we looked at, radio was ranked lowest as influential in selecting a college (Pampaloni, 2010).

So, how can we apply these results to our recruitment problem (i.e. raising awareness in traditional college-age students of our media education program)? Virtually all the research suggests that radio advertising will not be effective as a persuader in this instance. It can however be used to help build top-of-mind awareness, if the advertising is thoughtfully placed to reach our target demographic. For example, one suggestion may be to “sponsor” a segment about new music or emerging artists on the station(s) with the highest teen listenership, keeping in mind that demographic clustering like “12+,” which is most often used by the radio industry and audience research companies, is not useful.

The existing research further suggests that even though spot advertising is not a key factor in the undergraduate college selection process, it can play a role in raising awareness (Pampaloni, 2010). Our own study then may have significance as it indicates that our target demographic is reachable through broadcast radio. Thus an effective strategy may be to partner with the broadcast radio station in sponsoring the “pick of the week,” “today’s hot track,” “new artist to watch, or some other (possibly syndicated) segment that focuses on emerging artists and new music. “Sponsorship” implies that the school and the segment are inextricably linked in all on-air and off-air promotion. Another suggestion may be placement of advertising with online radio content providers like *Pandora*, *Spotify* and *I “Heart” Radio*, to increase the likelihood that our message is received

It is important to remember that any radio-based promotional strategy will be one small component of a larger integrated campaign in order to be effective. It will compliment print and more importantly, online promotion, as Enquirer Media's research shows the importance of online searches in the college selection process, and that 83% of those online searches for higher education begin with "non-branded" search terms (Fitzpatrick, 2012). The frequent use of non-branded search strategies seems to suggest that despite the efforts and resources invested in developing brand awareness by the institutions, most prospective students still search first for "what" they want to study – not "where" they want to study. Therefore, merely reminding prospects of the institution name or tagline, a tactic used successfully in consumer radio retail advertising, and now adopted by some post-secondary institutions, will probably not work here.

We caution generalizing conclusions from our survey data to other geographic locations. While we did not seek socioeconomic data, our geographic distribution was exclusively within Ohio's Appalachian counties. We might expect to obtain different results among more urban audiences. We are suggesting instead our research shows that more study is called for in attempting to discover what other sources may be used in the process of making the college decision (i.e. online search, social media, personal selling/visits, word-of-mouth, etc.). How is the importance of those sources affected by socioeconomic factors? Combining this data with better information on the factors that influence the decision-making in diverse target populations (cost/financial aid, access, acceptance, programs of study, scheduling, etc.) may lead to a template for post-secondary promotion and recruitment strategies that can be generalized and customized for other audiences in other locations.

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Personal Biography

Rick Shriver joined the faculty at Ohio University Zanesville in 1992, where he holds the rank of Associate Professor. He is a Fulbright Senior Scholar, and has lectured and researched in Southeast Asia. Professor Shriver's primary area of interest is audio recording. He is co-author of *Fundamentals of Audio Production*, a textbook published by Allyn & Bacon/Pearson. Shriver has authored several articles on audio recording and media, and Malaysian music and musical instruments. Professor Shriver is actively engaged in the recording and music industries, and regularly produces a variety of audio projects for radio, Internet and other media. An avid photographer, Shriver has had several photos published around the globe in textbooks, on websites, in magazines and journals, and other publications. He also maintains several websites, including a widely used resource on Malaysian musical instruments.

Appendix – Screenshot of survey

Radio Listening Among Teens

***1. What is your gender?**

- Female
- Male

***2. What is your age?**

- 13
- 14
- 15
- 16
- 17
- 18
- 19

***3. Do you listen to OVER-THE-AIR BROADCAST radio? That is, radio station(s) that you receive on AM or FM radio. This does NOT include Satellite radio, such as Sirius/XM.**

- Yes
- No

4. If you listen to OVER-THE-AIR BROADCAST radio, what station(s) do you listen to most often?

5. If you answered "YES," you listen to OVER-THE-AIR BROADCAST radio, which response best describes WHY you listen to OVER-THE-AIR BROADCAST radio?

- Music
- News
- Weather
- School Closings

Other (please specify)

6. From what other sources do you obtain audio content?

- | | |
|---|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Internet radio | <input type="checkbox"/> CDs |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Satellite radio (e.g. Sirius/XM) | <input type="checkbox"/> YouTube |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Podcasts | <input type="checkbox"/> Shared files from Internet |
| <input type="checkbox"/> iTunes | <input type="checkbox"/> Shared files from friends |

Other (please specify)

7. What device do you use most often to listen to audio content?

- | | |
|--|---|
| <input type="radio"/> AM/FM radio | <input type="radio"/> Other mobile device (e.g. iPad) |
| <input type="radio"/> Satellite radio | <input type="radio"/> Desktop computer |
| <input type="radio"/> iPod or other MP3 player | <input type="radio"/> Laptop computer |
| <input type="radio"/> Smartphone | <input type="radio"/> Television (broadcast, cable, or satellite) |

Other (please specify)

8. Where do you listen to audio content most often?

- Home
- Car
- School
- When walking, running, skating, etc.

Other (please specify)

9. Please tell us in which state you live.

10. Please tell us in which county you live.

Done