

The Young Guns of Talk Radio

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SPRINGFIELD, Mass. – There’s a perception held by many – especially those working in the consumer media – that all talk show

hosts doing shows on news/talk stations are men 50 years of age or older. They further postulate that when those hosts retire (or die!) there will be no one left to work in the format.

Given the radio industry’s general lack of a farm system, it’s hard to blame those who think it’s an industry of old white men. But the truth is there are young people breaking into talk radio and working successfully at stations across the country. We asked some of them what influence they believe their youth plays in hosting a radio talk show on a news/talk station.

Garret Lewis is the program director and morning drive host at Clear Channel Media and Entertainment’s KNST, Tucson. He



Garret Lewis

tells *TALKERS* that his age has a bearing on his general attitude and that comes through in how he images the radio station, “News/talk already has the 55-plus crowd so it’s very important to get the people in their 20s and

30s on board. I believe when the ‘older’ crowd hears the edgy liners and the attitude of the station, it makes them feel younger and it also gives the impression to the younger people that news/talk isn’t just for their parents. The fact that I’m 35 and my friends are around my age gives me an advantage because I know what makes a person in their late 20s and 30s get fired up emotionally and what interests them.”

Founder and co-host of the nationally syndicated program “Free Talk Live,” Ian Freeman, says he doesn’t think much about his age. “For me, my relative youth only comes into play when I observe the field of talk hosts in the business. It’s merely an observation of where I am in relation to the other hosts, who are, by-and-large, at least a couple of decades older than me. I started doing ‘Free Talk Live’ when I was 22, so now even I have a decade on the younger me.”

Almost to the person, young talk show hosts say their relative youth gives them the perspective of having witnessed the successful hosts of the modern era who came before them. Freeman says, “I have benefited from greats who inspired me like Lionel, Phil Hendrie, and the Love Doctors. ‘Free Talk Live’ isn’t doing anything radically different besides



Ian Freeman

breaking some of the rules of talk radio. When we started at Clear Channel, we were read ‘the rules.’ I took the ones I liked, and discarded the rest. For example, ‘they’ say don’t do an open phones talk show but that’s what we do. They, whoever they are, say never admit you’re wrong. Ridiculous! I could go on.”

At Cumulus Media’s KABC, Los Angeles, John Phillips also cites his ability to have ‘learned from the greats’ as the primary benefit of his place in time. “The biggest benefit of being young and employed in the radio industry is that I’ve been able to learn so much from people and, pardon the vulgarity but it’s necessary, who are f**king amazing at



John Phillips

what they do. Ed Pyle and John North taught me how to write at KNX. David G. Hall sat with me listening to endless hours of tape, teaching me what works and what doesn’t

work on a talk show. I learned how to produce a talk show from Doug McIntyre and Al Rantel. I spent monthly four-hour dinners full of nothing but talking shop with legendary LA newsman Dan Avey. Over a decade of reading Don Barrett analyze the LA radio scene in his daily columns – not to mention a cherished friendship. Plus too many others to mention here...”

From his perspective in the morning drive slot at KFMB, San Diego, Mike Slater believes his youth and the era in which he came of



Mike Slater

age affects how he views the issue he tackles. “I think I’m able to come at issues from a clean slate and fresh start. One of the biggest problems in this country is we’ve become so complacent that we’ve lost our imagina-

tion. People can’t *imagine* a world where the government is not in charge of education, or a world where the government doesn’t take money from you to pay for someone else’s retirement. Someone from a younger generation comes into the current situation in this country from a fresh perspective and asks, ‘Why do we do it like this? There has to be a better way!’ The more young talkers can challenge conventional wisdom, the better.”

Premiere Networks personality Andy Dean, host of “America Now,” quips, “It’s nice to be young in this business because everyone



Andy Dean

else is so old. Most news/talk radio hosts are antiquated dinosaurs, so listeners think I’m cool because I don’t wear sweater vests or use ED medication.”

Lowering the demos of the news/talk audience to make it more palatable to the agencies has been a bone of contention about which programmers have argued for almost two decades now. Some believe a younger host may bring in

younger listeners – especially if given an FM signal – but others say the nature of the format is that it's an adult attraction and one that skews to *older* adults.

John Phillips isn't holding out hopes of pulling in 20-somethings. "A 25-54 number for talk is totally unrealistic; 35-64 should be the desired 'young demo.' People don't care about news/politics until they own homes, run businesses, have kids and become stakeholders in society. Oddly, talk radio is the one profession where the president's theory on business creation is actually right; we couldn't do it without the government. When an obscure public agency shuts down some poor guy's business with an idiotic regulation to save the delta smelt, he instantly stops listening to dick jokes on morning zoos and talk radio has won a listener for life."

Being phony will never get a news/talk host younger demos, says Garret Lewis. "There are some talk show hosts that try really hard to reach the younger crowd and, when you try too hard, it comes off as out of touch and very awkward. College students and young adults relate to me while the older listeners like my show because I do my homework for the topics. Since I'm 35, I'm from the generation that doesn't like to be labeled and doesn't see life as left or right. I see it as right and wrong. Some of the older talk show hosts are in the tank for political parties and that's a big turn-off for listeners. This is why there are so many registered independents and they continue to grow."

Simply being young can have an advantage for those younger listeners already inclined to tune in to talk radio at the same time that youth can be refreshing to older P1s, Mike Slater explains. "I think the usual talk radio listener appreciates an engaged and passionate young conservative. They are concerned for the future of the country and they like to know that there are people coming up ready to continue the movement. On SiriusXM, we've decided to embrace my age and call the show 'Mike Slater: Young Conservative.' On KFMB, we decided to not make a big deal of it but everywhere I go people say, 'I had no idea you were so young.' At the same time, we're seeing more young people at station events."

The issues of who is listening and why, who is getting turned on to talk radio and who is tuning out are complicated, according to Ian

Freeman. "I wouldn't presume to tell anyone what to do with their demos, because obviously every year a whole lot of new people enter and leave the demo. Your demo will continue to exist. The ultimate question is: Will the younger people entering your demo (whatever it is) be listening to radio at all in this new media age? Therefore, what can local radio do to be relevant to young people and get them to choose local stations over the obvious draw of user-customizable products like Pandora, Slacker, their mp3 collection, and thousands of internet streams? The clear answer is to create programming that will attract those young people to local talk radio."

Freeman believes that you can bring young people to talk – on the FM band (he doesn't think there's a snowball's chance in hell of getting young people tuning to AM) – if you create programming that's outside the current paradigm and give it support. But he believes management has to move beyond the idea of either conservative/liberal political talk or blue 'hot talk.' "I suggest you look between the genres. Young people aren't stupid. Surely it's possible to create an entertaining program that doesn't talk down to people or pander to the lowest common denominator. (At least, I hope we're doing that live, seven nights a week on 'Free Talk Live.')

But John Phillips tells *TALKERS* he doesn't see the need to re-invent the wheel to try to attract people in their 30s and 40s. "Just do the fundamentals: good topics and strong opinions with a sense of humor and relevance. Young audiences also demand complete authenticity. Sports, reality TV, and 'mocumentary' sit-coms all do huge numbers with young people on TV. Gen-Xers and gen-Yers hate anything that appears to be staged, phony or predictable. That's how young people take their politics, too. Nobody under the age of 80 believes in a party's platform from start to finish. If a host leaves the reservation on some issue, don't be afraid to go there; you'll get street cred with the audience and they'll respect the fact that you're honest."

Andy Dean says, "Yes, young demos are important because young people buy lots of stupid stuff, and advertisers like that. As for the second question, (how can you attract

younger demos without alienating the older crowd?) people of all ages are attracted to someone intelligent. My show does well because I have the biggest brain in talk radio."

Why people get into talk radio can often tell you something fascinating about the characters themselves. Certainly, a percentage of talk hosts working today morphed into the role after working in music radio or in news radio. Others worked in TV news and yearned to be able to express their opinions. But many of the young talk hosts today tell us they listened to the medium as very young people – perhaps an indicator that there are more young ears out there tuning in than we often believe.

Mike Slater was one of those kids listening at an early age. "I fell in love with talk radio when my mom and I would listen to Jim Reith on WSYR, Syracuse on my way to swim practice. Whatever Reith was talking about that day, we would talk about that night around the dinner table. I grew up wanting to be that guy on the radio. The greatest compliment anyone can give me is they listen to the show with *their* kids on the way to school."

"My dad listened to talk as I was growing up in Sarasota, Florida," says Ian Freeman. "So that's what got me in. I recall listening to hosts like Bob Lassiter and Lionel. I started in the business with rock radio and it wasn't long before I knew I didn't want to be playing the same tunes over and over again and doing speed breaks into old age. Plus, I had lots more to say than could ever be said in the music format. Ultimately I wanted to create a show that wasn't built around the personality of the host(s). If I get hit by a bus tomorrow, 'Free Talk Live' can continue without me."

John Phillips says his parents were not influences but he had two broadcasting legends inspire him to be a talk host. "The two people who are responsible for me getting into this profession are Chick Hearn and Rush Limbaugh. Growing up, I never missed a Lakers game. It didn't matter if the Lakers were playing the Celtics in the World Finals or were blowing out the Sacramento Kings by 25 in January. I was *always* watching or listening. At a certain point I realized that while I loved Kareem and Magic, I was watching because of Chick. He was hilarious,

entertaining and unpredictable. And, while like me, he was in the tank for the Lakers, if they screwed up or pissed him off, you'd hear about it...you always got brutal honesty from Chick. Rush, in many ways, does the same thing with politics on talk radio. He makes what could be very boring subjects into a soap opera where – for three hours every day – you get humor, drama, catty insults, honest opinions and relevance. He always leaves you wanting more. El Rushbo turned an eight-year-old into a talk radio P1.”

Garret Lewis didn't fall in love with talk radio as a young person, taking a slightly more circuitous route. “I thought I wanted to be on television but I soon realized reading the glass for a few minutes would get very boring. My first job was a board op at XTRA Sports 910 in Phoenix and I thought I wanted to do sports radio. But talk station KFYI was in the same suite and I realized how fun it was to talk about more than just sports. Being able to entertain people and interact with them is an incredible feeling. I get to call out people for doing stupid things, crack jokes about other people, make people happy, make them mad and I get paid for it. It's such a rush to have the bully pulpit and listeners are truly in awe of it. People who think radio is old have no clue. I wouldn't trade my job for anything.”

Andy Dean states, “Talk radio is the last town hall meeting left in America. It is uncensored and honest. Also, I love that liberals fail in talk radio, and conservatives dominate – this is because liberalism is based on silly emotion, and conservatism is based on logic and reason.”

Using young talent to bring in young listeners is something that can be done if broadcasters want to spend the time and energy to create the programming. Ian Freeman says his mentor Bob Garrett just got his own talk show. “Being in his forties, he qualifies as young compared to most of the competition, and he's on one of those Florida hot talk stations, like the one on which I started. (The South Florida hot talk audience is a lot of fun - I miss having them.) After kicking ass in the ratings doing morning rock radio with partner Jeff Zito, the management at Beasley Broadcasting finally saw fit to let them go without any music whatsoever and moved them over to their brand new WRXX

“Talk that Rocks' to handle middays. The station is 100,000 watts. I'm jealous. He and Zito totally deserve it. They are proof that the next generation of talkers may already be on your staff (or just coming on as an intern, as I did 15 years ago) - you just have to give them the shot. Try something new. Time's running out.”



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