



IS YOUR STATION RIGHT-HANDED OR LEFT? by Alan Burns

By now most people have heard of right-brain and left-brain functions: the left side of your brain is generally better at math, systems, and logic; the right side takes over in art, music, and creative skills. Almost everyone has a dominant hemisphere; people with equally strong sides are very rare.

That's why artists, for example, need business managers. And it's why radio stations can be dull. Radio (especially programming) used to be a haven for right-brained creative types but now leans toward left-brain dominant managers: people who are logical, organized, and who can create and live within budgets. These qualities and skills get you hired and promoted, but they don't always lend themselves to creating an entertaining radio station.

Being Logical Ain't Right

Many Program Directors are strong with rotation schemes/RCS setups, liner and promo scheduling, ratings analysis, budgets, clocks, and generally just keeping things running; the "Biz" side of "Showbiz" at a radio station.

Fewer programmers are stronger at the "show" side, which includes colorful names, creative writing, risk-taking, cinematic production, "seize the day" stunts/events, morning show content, and general out-of-the-box thinking.

What's wrong with being a left-brain PD? Nothing, really.

Radio stations need both products: systems that keep the place running (relatively) efficiently, and colorful thinking that creates entertainment between the songs. But in most formats, a left-brained radio station can be too dull to be as successful as it needs to be.

Its rotations are probably great, but its verbal content may be lackluster. If your left-brain skills aren't balanced by right-brain creativity, your station will be limited.

Left Behind!

Here are some sample characteristics of stations that have left-dominant versus right-dominant personalities:

Left

- Perfect rotations
- Great horizontal offsets
- Good production systems
- Precise liner and promo rotations
- Very literal promo writing
- Finely tuned research
- Regular performance reviews
- Few last-minute crises
- "Business casual" attire

Right

- Unusual feature names
- Lack of radio cliches
- Entertaining morning show
- Reaction generators
- Creative copy
- Colorful jock names
- Left-field ideas
- Friday crashes
- Casual attire/street costumes



There's nothing innately negative about the list on the left. But if you add the first seven items from the list on the right to that list, you have a much more interesting and entertaining radio station.

Remember, too, that Arbitron measures recall, not listening.

Are you World Famous?

Which station is more likely to be recalled easier: the station where you hear Jed The Fish (or Poorman, or Richard Blade, etc) or the station where you hear a guy who sounds like someone out of the phone book? (By the way, all those air names were once on KROQ, one of the great right-brain stations of all time).

So if you're a left-brain manager (and if you are right-handed, you probably are), how do you make a radio station with characteristics of both sides? There are several tactics you can use to insure the right-brain, creative side of your station is healthy.

Tactics to Getting Right

Here are a few:

- Hire complementary right-brainers and protect them from people who think they're too nutty.
- Reward creative thinking. That includes praising ideas you may not use. You don't want to shut down the generation of different ideas.

I once had an overnight guy who left me a written idea almost every day. We didn't use all of them, but I made sure he knew they were appreciated. That guy, Vinny Brown, is now the PD of WBLS in New York.

- Understand that everyone, including you, can be creative. Creativity is a skill you can learn, not something you're born with.
- Learn (and teach your staff) the rules of brainstorming, then use them regularly.
- Solicit ideas from other parts of the radio station.
- Get better at time management and delegation. Time pressure is one of the biggest obstacles to creativity.
- Use your left-brain tendency to build systems that encourage right-brainness: regularly scheduled creative sessions, systematize the search for topics to seize, etc.
- Be willing to take some risks or you'll never be first to do anything. If you always find yourself asking "who else has done this?" -- you may be acting too conservatively.
- Finally, open yourself up to inspiration. Going to well-staged concerts, circuses (like Cirque du Soleil), performance art (Blue Man Group, etc) and great theater productions periodically can help keep you jazzed about the potential of flamboyance to entertain.

Cashing in on Balance

What's this right/left-brain balance worth?



The best example I can think of is one of my favorite clients, a station that understands the non-music side of entertainment and which is one of the very few stations to conduct large-sample weekly in-house ratings research.

Almost every time we have a great creative session at this station, we see at least one of the resulting ideas juice the share 30% or more right away, and this station continues to rank #1 in its multi-million-person market.

Here's the way it feels internally: We spend some time in the conference room, eating pizza, cracking each other up, and writing down ideas on big pieces of paper -- and as a result, the numbers go up by almost a third.

Works for me.