



Radio Promotion

Vivek J. Tiwary

Many people will tell you that radio is king in the realm of music marketing: You'll never be a huge star without a radio hit; once you secure radio play, press and MTV will follow suit; a big tour will not be far off, etc. In many ways, this pattern holds true. However, it is worth noting that there are several examples of highly successful, long-lasting artists-- of all genres from Fugazi to Phish-- that have never had a radio hit.



Nevertheless, it is undeniable that radio can be integral in exposing a new artist to new fans and taking a local artist to a national level. Accordingly, it is extremely difficult to obtain meaningful airplay. Putting it bluntly, successful radio promotion revolves around making and managing relationships-- who you know and how you know them, making the right contacts, presenting the right pitch, and designing the best spin to convince a station that they should be playing your music. You should know before reading this section that radio promotion is an art that demands a certain style you may simply neither have nor desire to cultivate. On top of that, it can take a great deal of time to make all the contacts and connections that are required for successful radio promotion. So, while you should give promotion your best shot and take DIY (Do It Yourself) as far as you can by following the guidelines in StarPolish, you should also be aware that radio promotion is one area where before too long you will need to enroll the assistance of an "expert." That is, you will eventually need to either bring someone onto your business team other than your manager who is specifically responsible for radio promotion, hire an independent radio promotion company (often referred to as an "indie"), or ink a record deal with a label that has a good promotion department. But for now, there is still a great deal you can accomplish on your own...

1. Radio List:

Much like with College Press, you must start your promotional radio efforts by compiling a list of all the radio stations in your area where you would like your music to be played-- a working wishlist. It's probably smart to start with college stations over commercial radio. It's also worth mentioning that *public* radio stations are often amenable to new artists, though college radio still tends to be the most experimental with its playlists.

College radio, compared with commercial radio, is generally more willing to take risks by supporting an alternative or unknown artist. Because college stations usually obtain much of their funding from their affiliated academic institution, they don't need to worry as much about advertising and sponsors, and can therefore take more chances with unique playlists and unusual styles. Moreover, the folks working at college stations are usually young students who are passionate about music, and so will be more likely to play a record simply because they like it (i.e. without commercial reasons in mind). But unfortunately, college radio isn't as powerful as it once was. In the past, many bands such as REM benefited from college radio as a springboard toward larger-scale, massive commercial/mainstream success. But it's been years since college radio has provided such a springboard. Why this is so is an academic argument; I'm of the opinion that since commercial radio embraced "Alternative" or "Modern Rock" as a viable format, college radio was no longer looked at or listened to as representing the expert voice in picking new music. But the reasons aside, it is an undeniable fact that obtaining college airplay has its own merits in exposing your music to new fans-- but there are no guarantees that it will act as a springboard to success in other areas of music marketing (as commercial radioplay usually does).



You may find that you have no choice but to start with college radio. While college radio-station personnel will definitely speak to you and consider playing your record, many commercial stations simply don't play records by unsigned acts unless that act has some truly remarkable story surrounding it (being great musically is, unfortunately, not the deciding factor here). In fact, one of the major benefits of signing a record deal is obtaining access to national commercial radio promotion. If you are a signed act, your label's promotion department should be making the calls to the commercial stations (and your manager should be making sure the label is on the ball with their efforts). On a related note, if you're seeking a record deal, look for a label with a promotion department that has a solid reputation and likes your music.

Start with the StarPolish [Database](#) for references of radio stations in your target market(s), as well as the important contact information. However, I strongly recommend that you supplement whatever information you get from StarPolish with your own list that you compile from scratch. While we update our database often, the music industry moves quickly, new stations open up (and old stations change musical format) all the time, and contact information changes rapidly; so you may uncover new information in your target markets faster than we do. Also, remember that you are clearly not the only artist who will be using the StarPolish [Database](#). You should strive to stand apart from other artists by working with a personal, more comprehensive list, specifically suited to your act. In other words, supplementing our database with your own radio list may be a tedious task, but it's worth the effort.

2. Servicing Radio and Radio Personnel:

Servicing college radio involves providing the station with full-length CDs and singles, and updating appropriate radio personnel with information on your act and developments with your career (new releases, upcoming concerts to add to the concert calendar, special promotions in the area, etc.). You should be in regular touch with your radio stations to ensure that they have everything they need. From time to time, you will want to distribute special [promotional items](#) (T-shirts, posters, keychains, etc.) to your radio contacts in an effort to get them more excited about your act. Servicing radio will involve a combination of regular phone calls-- most radio-station personnel keep office hours that you should respect-- and the occasional on-site station visit. There are several radio station personnel with whom you will want to develop relationships, and you will need to determine how influential each person is at each individual station:



- *Music Director (MD)*: adds records to a station's playlist; with the direction of the Program Director, determines what music gets played; may also determine how often a song gets played
- *Program Director (PD)*: directs special programs; to some extent directs the "style" of the station
- *DJs*: play the songs; direct special programming hours (the metal hour, the ska show, the local bands' hour, etc.); may determine how often a song gets played, but often spin discs according to a given playlist set by the MD and PD
- *Promotions/Marketing Director*: coordinates special events and sponsorships for the station

At college stations, the most important person to be in touch with varies by station, staff, and from year to year; you will need to feel out the personnel situation on a station-by-station basis, but starting by trying to contact the MD is a good idea.

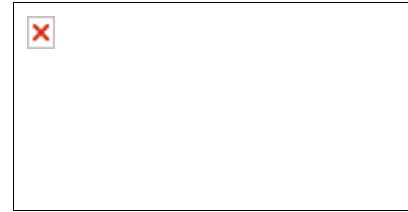
At commercial stations, the MD is definitely the most powerful person, but is also the hardest to reach. You will have better success reaching other personnel, and if there is an appropriate specialty show for your music (especially a local artists show) the PD and his or her office will be more helpful. Finally, DJs are not to be underestimated; while they usually can't make decisions about adding songs to their station's regular rotation, their opinions are often valued at the station, and having a DJ on your side can go a long way toward successful radio promotion.

3. Adds, Charts, And Tracking

Obtaining an "add" means getting a song added to a station's playlist. Once a song is in the top percentage of a playlist (a "meaningful add"), it will affect the radio charts. Obtaining a position on the charts not only indicates that your record is achieving excellent exposure, it has solid ancillary benefits-- a strong chart position can be

used as leverage to obtain a good review in the press, secure a good tour, convince other radio stations to follow suit and add your record, etc.

Most college radio stations report to [CMJ](#) (College Music Journal), a weekly publication that monitors college-radio airplay and generates a top 200 chart. Every Wednesday, new chart numbers are released, and their website gives you free (but partial) access to these charts. I recommend, however, that you subscribe to the magazine to access the full college charts for weekly study. A one-year subscription is \$345 or \$199 in electronic (PDF) format, and subscription info can be found on the site. Regularly reading CMJ will give you an excellent sense of the national college-radio picture, what genres of music college radio is embracing, and to what extent, etc.



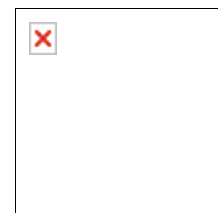
A company called BDS (Broadcast Data Services) compiles commercial radio charts from a national sample of airplay. The best way to keep tabs on these commercial charts is by regularly checking out [Billboard](#), a weekly music-industry trade magazine whose website allows free (but partial) access to the BDS charts for all the major radio formats (a station's format describes the genre of music it plays). Subscribing to [Billboard](#) isn't a bad idea, as it gives a wealth of information on music industry developments-- literally everyone in the business reads it. But just for the purposes of keeping tabs on the charts, the website's free partial access will suffice.

Studying the Billboard-reported charts is also the best way to learn all the different station formats that are out there (Modern Rock, Top 40, Mainstream Rock, Adult Contemporary, etc.), as well as to get a sense of what kinds of artists fit on those formats. For example, you may wonder what "Modern Rock" means. And in fact, the types of artists who are being classified as "Modern Rock" change all the time-- really the only way to know is by studying the most current Modern Rock charts and seeing exactly who those stations are spinning at that moment in time.

Individual station chart positions are determined by a song's rotation at the station. The rotation is in turn determined by different personnel at different stations. At commercial stations, the Music Director for the most part determines the playlist and rotations. College station MDs are also integral in determining the station's playlist, although some college stations are a bit more freeform, allowing DJs to play a certain number of songs at their own discretion, according to their own tastes. There are several categories of rotations:

- *Heavy*: song is in the top third of the playlist
- *Medium*: song is in the middle of the playlist
- *Light*: song is at the bottom of the playlist
- *Review*: the MD and DJs have not yet decided whether to add the song
- *Recurrent*: song is played every now and then, usually at the DJ's discretion
- *Dropped*: song has been removed from rotation

Unfortunately, there is no science for obtaining an add onto a station's playlist. As mentioned before, obtaining an add is a matter of making and working the right relationships at the right stations. And do your homework well in advance of pitching an add: Try to figure out what each station likes. Find out what other artists they're playing, what their vibe is. Is there a specialty show that your act belongs on? If so, you may need to pitch the specialty show add to the PD; call their office and find out. The point is, make sure that you are targeting the most appropriate-- and likely-- add possible.



That being said, when making your pitch to obtain an add (this will most likely be made to the MD), keep in the front of your mind what the station is looking for and spin your pitch toward that end as much as possible. If you're talking to a public or college station that doesn't care about anything *other* than the music, focus your pitch toward your sound, songs, production, and musicality. If you're talking to a commercial station or a more formal college station, the station will be more concerned with *what its audience will like*. Commercial stations in particular derive their primary income from advertising and sponsorships. So they need to prove to potential advertisers and sponsors that the station has a large listenership. Accordingly, the station will play music that it feels will both draw and hold the largest audience. If you are talking to one of these types of stations, you should concentrate your spin on angles that point out your public popularity-- the size of your mailing list, the number of people who come to your shows, the number of shows you play in the target market per month, the response from local press, noteworthy career developments, etc.

Like working with the press, keep in regular touch with your radio-station personnel, being sensitive toward not crossing the line between politely keeping in touch and being a regular pain in the ass. A live connection is important, but the occasional short email in lieu of a phonecall will be appreciated. Be persistent in making your pitch toward obtaining an add; if at first you don't succeed, keep coming back with additional pitches-- but only when you have a real career development or something new to report and noteworthy to say. Once you obtain an add, go out of your way to thank the MD and the station-- send them some kind of thank-you present. For more advice, read the StarPolish section on [Networking](#), which includes information on how to make contacts, as well as how to treat them and how to conduct business most efficiently.

Finally, you should keep in touch with your station contacts consistently, even after you have obtained an add, in order to perform tracking, try to increase your song's rotation, and develop a longer-term relationship with these contacts that will serve you throughout your career. Tracking is finding out how often the station is playing your record. Keep in mind that for every song that is being played on the station, there is someone calling to perform tracking for that song. Reporting tracking can be, simply put, a boring pain in the ass for a busy MD (or his or her assistant). Be respectful of your station personnel when performing tracking and only make tracking calls during their office hours. Some MDs will even keep specific office hours only for tracking calls (respect these office hours). Obviously, you should pay close attention to tracking, monitor movements in your record's rotation, and make pitches to the station to bump your record into heavier rotation. Go into these pitches keeping the same things in mind as you did when making the initial pitch to obtain the add: What has changed that warrants increased rotation of your song?

4. Interviews / Performances

In conjunction with pitching adds and increased rotation for your record, you should solicit radio interviews for your act. These can be live on-air or recorded for edit and later playback. These can also be conducted over the telephone (called "phoners"), or in-person if the band is in town (often done at soundcheck before a show, appropriately called "soundcheck interviews"). Finally, these can include a brief special performance of a song or two, usually done acoustically due to lower associated production costs. Go into these pitches keeping the same things in mind as you do when you're making your add pitches, but focus on anything that might make your act "pressworthy." Is there a unique story associated with your act? A charity you support or interesting accomplishment you have achieved? An outrageous [cross-promotion](#)?



A radio interview or performance is a great way to obtain extra marketing value from a radio station outside of simply having the station play your record. Obviously, it will be easier to solicit an interview or performance from stations that are already playing your music and have been supportive of your act, but it is not uncommon to convince a station to interview your band in advance of obtaining a proper add. Sometimes, a good interview itself will be the thing that convinces a wavering station to add your record into regular rotation.

Once you have set up an interview, there are a variety of critical things you must do and ensure in advance of the interview-- and these are the same as the guidelines for [press interviews](#).

5. Special Promotions

You should always be as creative as you can with your business efforts, think beyond normal conventions, and design and implement unique business projects for your act. Radio marketing is no exception. While the heart of your efforts may focus on the difficult process of obtaining adds, performing tracking, and pitching rotation increases, you should also periodically set up special promotions with your radio stations. These should be as unique/unusual as possible, but some simple guidelines include ticket giveaways to promote a tour date, on-air T-shirt giveaway contests, or creative [cross-promotions](#) between a radio station and a record store or other marketing channel. With a little persistence and a good relationship with the Promotions/Marketing Director, you may even be able to obtain radio-station sponsorship for a show or another non-radio special event you have organized in your market. You should keep in close contact with the Promotions/Marketing Director, as well as other station personnel, to both identify and organize unique special-promotions opportunities.

Remember that with all successful marketing efforts, creativity and motivation are the principal keys.