



Question To Radio: What Business Are We Really In?

A December 2000 article by Norm Brodsky in *Inc. Magazine* radically altered my thinking about business. The gist of the article was this: You may not be in the business you think you are.

Brodsky was in the records storage business. It was doing well, but not really well. Then it occurred to him that he was actually in the real estate business, but on a very small scale. So, he began using real estate marketing methods, and his business really took off. The lesson learned is that once you find out what business you are truly in, and stick with it, you really make progress. You are also better prepared to adapt to the inevitable changes that will result from technological innovation.

If passenger railroads had better realized they were in the human transportation business, not the train business, would they have made more of an effort to buy airplanes? Who knows? We do know that airlines have largely replaced railroads as a means of transporting large numbers of people. But let's face it: Unless someone figures out a way to keep a machine in the air without using fossil fuels, things will change again. The airlines that realize they are in the human transportation business, and adapt to the inevitable technological changes, will have a better chance of persevering.

Radio is nearing the 100-year mark, having hit the airwaves in the 1920s. Coincidentally, it is facing a period of unprecedented technology-driven change. What has radio learned during the past century? It seems this is a good time to get back to basics.

There are two primary forms of human communication: interpersonal and mass communication. Interpersonal communication occurs when you interact with someone one on one. There is not much between the two of you that can interfere with the process, and you get immediate feedback as to how the message is received.

Mass communication, on the other hand, involves conveying an idea from one to many, most often by means of a complex technology and with little opportunity for immediate, meaningful feedback. Of course, the feedback part is changing, because technology is leading us to methods of dramatic improvement in that area.

But either interpersonal or mass, the core purpose of communication remains the same: to convey an intangible idea from a sender's thinking to a receiver's thinking, in a manner in which the original idea is transferred as clearly as possible.

Radio people are the world's greatest experts at conveying ideas to the masses using only one of the five senses: hearing. Radio is in the aural mass communication business, and no one has more experience or is better at it.


The tools have changed in radio over the years, and all indications are that they will change a whole lot more, and at an increasingly faster pace. These changes will result in two fundamental adjustments:

1. Radio has had the distinct advantage of being at the information "pinch point" for a single delivery technology. New delivery technologies will dramatically broaden the audience delivery options and thereby reduce the "gatekeeping" process that the industry has profited from for so long. Almost anyone will have access to a global audience.
2. New production technologies are already replacing rooms full of expensive equipment with the personal computer. In other words, it is a heck of a lot easier to produce programming. But, is it good programming?

Aural mass communication will be popular and effective as long as people have ears (at least as far as we know) — and ears are a great way for people to take in ideas while they are doing something else. Ears are the ultimate input devices for the multi-tasker.

We spend a lot of time trying to predict the future, and indeed we should. Will the future of radio be in "high def," surround, podcasting, cell phones, WiMax, satellite, a combination of them all, or something that hasn't been invented yet? Will we even continue to call it *radio*? Nobody knows. But there is one thing we do know: The fundamentals of aural mass communication will remain the same. That's radio's greatest asset, its core competency, and its expertise.

Radio will certainly survive in some form. Like the transportation business, however, some of its players will not. Radio must stick with the basics, with what it is really good at, and capitalize on the opportunities that new technology will bring to the aural mass communication process. 📻

 **QUICKREAD**

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