



In late 2016, the “spark” for Classical Spark began with Wende Persons, then Managing Director for Classical Music Rising and a veteran marketer. After thinking about the best overall approach to a CMR marketing effort and doing a fair amount of listening to CMR partners around the country, SRG focused on branding and on-air promotion “inside-the-walls” before turning to more complex and costly external promotion tactics, such as billboards and other paid media. Our listening review told us that while a handful of stations deserved high marks in their on-air promotion, most CMR partners would benefit from an effort to lift all boats.

We huddled with marketing and promotion advisors, including Deborah Blakeley, Izzi Smith (then at NPR, and an architect of their Spark campaign), and Craig Curtis (who was also working with NPR Spark) to design a joint on-air campaign for Classical Music Rising partners. SRG subsequently retained Craig to coordinate the effort, which with NPR’s enthusiastic blessing, we dubbed Classical Spark.

Fast forward to today. As SRG completes our Classical Spark effort, we want to express our appreciation to Craig Curtis for his work over the past 18 months. He’s a shoulder-to-the-wheel kind of guy, smart, and a lot of fun to work with. We appreciate the Herculean effort he has made to imbed a critical skillset and culture change at many of our stations.

We asked Craig to wrap up Classical Spark with observations about the work and final words of wisdom.

*Terry Clifford & Tom Thomas*

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## Reflections on Classical Spark

### Craig Curtis

#### **Spark: The Good and the Bad**

The best part of Classical Spark was the opportunity to listen regularly to all the participating stations, then talk with station staff about their on-air identification, promotion, and positioning, and to help stations talk with each other, sharing ideas and approaches to common problems. This produced a lot of good work, such as the [on-air promotion and positioning guide](#), which I hope will have long-running value.

One of the most important outcomes of Classical Spark was the sharing of promotion, positioning, and branding ideas among stations. I encouraged stations to “steal” ideas from each other whenever and wherever possible, and a lot of that happened.

For example, several stations adopted a flexible and highly adaptable positioner idea being used at WDAV in Charlotte. Promotional scripts for spots promoting midday and at-work

listening from New York Public Radio; KDFC, San Francisco; KUSC, Los Angeles; and several other organizations were adapted by many stations. And my many conversations with CMR stations resulted in great ideas regarding live-events, fundraising, and social media that were also shared with other stations.

My biggest disappointment is that we were unable to find a way to consistently sustain the exchange of promotional ideas in a way that provides meaningful and ongoing support for promotion at CMR partner stations – and others – using those shared ideas and assets.

And I wish I could say that we are wrapping up our work with an ingrained commitment at every station to the kind of promotion I believe the system needs and an approach to sustain regular promotional exchange among stations.

Although . . . I believe we planted the seeds.

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### **Hearing Ourselves through the Ears of Listeners**

Over the first several months of Classical Spark, I listened to each station for a few (or sometimes many) hours, usually in the background while doing other work, so in a sense approximating a normal listener experience.

Unlike a normal listener, though, I took notes on how the station identified itself, used positioners or liners, and scheduled live and produced promotion.

Following each listening session I spoke with the station manager and/or program director, occasionally joined by other production or promotion personnel or announcers. In each of these conversations we discussed the station's promotion plan, if any (not all had a firm plan) as well as the station's overall strategic goals and priorities, so I could better understand how positioning and promotion fit into the larger plan for the station.

Not surprisingly, several of the larger stations were more thorough and intentional about positioning and promotion. They had well-developed plans and strategies combining on-air, live events, social media, other digital media, print, billboards, and traditional advertising, all supported by significant budgets and staffing.

These stations were very interested in what the other major market stations were doing, and nearly all agreed to share ideas, scripts and even finished spots with other stations. There was an initial wariness about sharing recommendations based on proprietary research or marketing studies, but most of that concern passed quickly, even good-naturedly, as everyone immediately recognized their work was not secret or protectable since it was already on their public air!

At the other end of the spectrum were several stations that had never established the most basic rules and guidelines for station identification, such as use of the station call-letters, dial position, or station name. Announcers were simply left to their own devices, which led to hugely inconsistent identification and in some cases virtually no identification at all beyond the FCC-required hourly legal station ID. At these stations, the station managers were sheepish in admitting the lack of clear policies in place – but I believe that in each case this has changed.

I had many conversations dealing with the granular business of how precisely to organize use of call-letters, frequencies, and station names, putting several people through simple exercises in order to help them come up with the best alternatives. My follow-up listening after these conversations revealed much more consistent identification and, for many stations, their first use of liners or positioners.

Not surprisingly most stations fell in a large middle area between those with well-developed systems and those with little or none at all. Promotional organization on most stations was well intended, but mostly hit-and-miss in its execution. With these stations a few prodding questions on promotional priorities usually led to clear answers, producing some easy changes to station policies and procedures.

This group of stations also included organizations with multiple full-time station formats. These organizations had typically acquired new signals in recent years, creating opportunities for format consolidation within the overall station group – which then led to the organization's first full-time classical service.

Nearly all of the multiple service organizations admitted that in the intervening years they had focused primarily on their news stations, while paying little attention to promotion and marketing of their classical stations. These stations welcomed the opportunity to discuss basic branding and positioning, and in each case they developed refined identification and positioning as well as more focused promotional strategies.

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### **Strategies behind Best Practices**

In the course of completing these calls I heard repeated requests for a guide to the basics of identification, promotion, and positioning. Working with Wende Persons, we outlined the major areas of interest and wrote a primer for distribution to the stations. Initially we intended to produce a simple one-sheet hand-out. As the hand-out was reviewed by CMR participants, early drafts led to a lengthier document that dealt with many basic concepts in some detail.

And thus was born the [Best Practice Guide to Effective On-air Positioning and Promotion](#), a true team effort that we distributed to CMR partner stations and, subsequently, to the wider public radio community.

The Guide also served as the basis for presentations by Wende and myself at SRG's CMR meeting held last summer in Maine, a session at the PRPD's "new program director workshop" held just prior to the PRPD Washington DC conference, and then at a regular session at the PRPD Content Conference. All of the presentations drew on conversations with the stations, data analysis from SRG, and a number of stations promotion audio examples. I will be doing an expanded presentation at PRPD's "new program director workshop" that precedes their 2018 conference in Austin.

In my ongoing work for NPR Spark, several news stations told me how much they have appreciated the guide and how they use it at their local news stations. While the guide was written with and for classical music radio stations, the advice and direction is applicable to any format.

The guide led to a number of follow-up communications with stations, expanding on sections from the original guide, addressing specific questions that arose from stations, such as cross-

promotion between news and music stations, and suggestions on building a promotion schedule.

I also made myself available as a source of information about how different classical stations were dealing with controversies surrounding James Levine, Charles Dutoit, and other significant performers accused of sexual misconduct in terms of overall station positioning and music announcements. At many stations these conversations were difficult, uncomfortable, and demoralizing – stations took solace in the fact that they were not alone and made their final decisions inside their own organizations.

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### **Carry On Friends!**

I continue to believe that there is significant headroom for improved promotion at all stations.

We have done a good deal of spade work and stations are producing a solid amount of good and very adaptable promotion.

We still need stations to make promotion a priority and to determine the most effective ways to support that promotion within our organizations.

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[Go here for a tour of Classical Spark publications, presentations, and activity overview](#)