



Radio Programming Best Practice Cheat Sheet

A number of stations have asked NPR to share some best practices for radio basics. We believe these are a good, universal starting point for your station to consider and adjust for your own market.

This is version one. We expect this document to evolve as audiences and the best ways to serve them change. While the basics are easy to overlook, they are incredibly important. They create the foundation for the overall experience your listeners have with your station. Getting the basics right sets your station up for deeper loyalty and audience growth, and differentiation in your market. The goals of radio programming best practices are to:

- Keep your station top of mind
- Keep your P1s listening longer
- Increase occasions for your P2s and P3s
- Remind your listeners what you stand for

Tag lines - Have one that speaks to your distinctive benefits to listeners. Use it at least 3-4 times an hour, and as often as in every break. You are reminding listeners why they love you and helping to define who you are. Work collaboratively with your marketing team to use your liner as a core part of off-air branding, and co-brand with NPR whenever possible ([here's why](#)). Here are a few tag lines we like.

We're live, we're local, we're Washington's NPR station, WAMU 88.5
WBUR, Boston's NPR News Station
93.9 FM WNYC, NPR News and the New York Conversation

Call letters and dial position - Your name and address are important, even in the digital world. Say them once every break. Standardize how you want them said. Is it ninety-one-seven KXYZ or ninety-one-*point*-seven KXYZ? Consistency is important. If you have a network or use a brand rather than call letters, say that every break along with your frequency.

We know networks can make frequencies difficult. We suggest Prime +1. In every break, name the call letters and dial position of the network station with the most listening, plus a rotating set call letters and dial position of another station in your network. ID all your network stations at the top of the hour.

Quarter hour maintenance - Tell your listeners what's coming up in the next 15 minutes. Be specific. For example, talk about an interesting story rather than just saying the name of the show that's on next. Use some mystery in your writing to keep people listening longer.

Promotional strategy - Promote your hits. Morning Edition and All Things Considered are two of the biggest radio programs in the country. Focus the majority of your promotional energy here. Promote a few things a lot, meaning 75-100 promos each week. In addition to the magazine shows, pick 3-4 promo priorities every 3-6 months, and really focus on them. For everything else, forward promote it :15 minutes before it airs.

Promos tell the audience how to use your station, signaling a good reason to keep listening or to listen again. The more frequently people listen, the more likely they are to support your station financially.

Traffic - In general, eliminate traffic information. It's available to your listeners more easily through mobile devices. If there are traffic incidents that rise to the level of news (major accident, public safety), mention them. The normal backups on a regular workday are not newsworthy.

Airchecking - Make time to sit with your air talent and review tape. Remind them about the basics. Praise them when they are doing well, and point out areas for improvement. Aircheck talent at least every other week.

Focused listening - Set aside a full day, at least once a quarter, for focused listening to your station. No meetings. Limited e-mail. Focus on what you hear. What sounds great? What needs improvement? Talk with your team about both.

Create a sound stylebook - A [sound stylebook](#) serves as your air staff's roadmap. It documents everything from break structure to how to use music to how to say the frequency. Basically you're taking the decisions you've made based on Best Practices and putting them into a guide for your talent.