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NETWOKRS

RTES HEARS DEBATE ON NETWORK RADIO
• Labunski, McLendon differ
• Both stress own best points

Spirited discussion on the future of network radio spotlighted a luncheon meeting of the Radio & Television Executives Society of New York Wednesday when Gordon B. McLendon, independent station owner and operator, debated the topic with Stephen Labunski, vice president in charge of programming for the American Broadcasting Network.

Mr. Labunski, who contended that network radio in general—ABN in particular—does have a future, paid tribute at the outset to Mr. McLendon's radio operations. He listed as reasons for Mr. McLendon's success as programming designed for maximum listener appeal, showmanship with heavy on-the-air promotion, bold exploitation, including treasure hunts, mobile units and publicity "gimmicks"; aggressive salesmanship, and adherence to a firm rate card. Then Mr. Labunski added:

"The very things which Gordon McLendon, Todd Storz and others are doing to assure local radio a future are substantially the same things which American Broadcasting is doing to help assure radio networks a future. Therefore, if Gordon McLendon has a future, so do we."

Mr. Labunski insisted that if network radio incorporated into its structure "the more exciting, the more listenable, the more salable radio" of some local outlets and translated these qualities into national terms, then network radio could flourish. At ABN, Mr. Labunski said "we are injecting that vital degree of difference."

Among the changes at American, he said, have been live, "fun" radio with live personalities, live orchestras, live singers and live audiences. ABN affiliates, Mr. Labunski pointed out, will have exclusive to them the programming not available to the local independents. He voiced the belief that network personalities exert "a persuasive salesmanship" to entertain and sell at the same time. The national advertiser, according to Mr. Labunski, can use network radio with "great simplicity," achieving national coverage through one buy.

He acknowledged that network radio has short-changed itself, setting its rates "far too low." But he claimed that if the medium programs to listeners' tastes, exploits its product properly and sells itself "confidently," network radio can become "a billion dollar industry."

Mr. McLendon, a long-time harsh critic of network value and practices, bluntly expressed the view that "it is hard to believe that two competing networks cannot satisfy the residual needs of the public for network service." He prefaced this contention with the observation that the sole pre-eminent function served by radio networks today is to provide coverage of national and international events. In every other area of programming, Mr. McLendon asserted, "local radio and/or television is superior."

He challenged Mr. Labunski on the value of live music programming. Mr. McLendon insisted that local music programming (largely recorded) can invariably "wallop" a network program because the local personality builds up a following through talk about the local weather, events and customs. Mr. McLendon said "the very basic question" of the topic under discussion is whether radio stations "can afford to have four radio networks survive." He claimed that with revenue that can support only two networks, there is "a four-way split of the pie that has resulted in such a dilution of network rates that the whole economic future of radio could be threatened."

He launched a highly critical attack of network spot practices. As an example, he said, ABN's highest open rate on its "five-minute units" amounted to $1,500. He calculated that this is an average of $4.75 per announcement per station. Then he added pointedly: "At KLIF in Dallas, KILT Houston and KTSA San Antonio, we wouldn't let an advertiser burp for $4.75."

Mr. McLendon listed these other "shortcomings" of network radio: It lacks the flexibility of spot radio; it does not have the auto listenship that local radio has; it cannot persuade the affiliate to invest in promotion or merchandising because the station cannot afford it on the basis of the revenue accruing to the outlet from a network campaign.

NBC-TV Daytime Sales Total
$3 Million Since September 1

Five advertisers have placed $3 million in gross daytime business with NBC-TV since the first of September, it was announced last week by William R. Goodheart Jr., vice president television network sales.

The advertisers are: Welch Grape Juice Co., Westfield, N. J., through Richard K. Manoff Adv., New York, which has ordered the alternate Friday 4:45 p.m. portion of Queen for a Day for 43 weeks starting Nov. 8 and also have renewed its alternate-week quarter-hour sponsorship of Comedy Time for 52 weeks starting...