

'They're playing our song' at WGAR

Thayer-Lund combo makes music relate to listeners and their dazzle radio is paying off in the ratings

When Jack Thayer, general manager, and John Lund, program director and marketing manager, were brought to WGAR(AM) Cleveland by Nationwide Communications Inc., the station was on the ropes and in the red. That was in August 1970. "WGAR was a classic case of an old-line network station that had been very, very successful," Mr. Thayer relates today. "But attrition had set in—a certain amount of apathy and a certain unawareness of what was really going on in the radio business or in the world around them. This was the kind of radio station that in its heyday did not even subscribe to a rating service. It was so well accepted that it didn't have to prove anything."

There was plenty of room for proving by 1970. The Cleveland market had come under the radio dominance of CKLW(AM) Windsor-Detroit, a station nearly 100 miles away. WJW(AM) and WIXY(AM), both Cleveland, had be-

come the dominant AM's locally. Nineteen months later, WJW and WGAR are one-two in morning drive time and WGAR is first in midday. CKLW remains first in evening drive and at night. WGAR's audience, which in 1970 was 70% 35-and-older, is now 70% 35-and-under. Moreover, in terms of audience volume alone, it is up some 95%. And the station is in the black. Something had happened in the interval.

The formula was a simultaneous turning of the clock backward and forward—backward to the kind of radio excitement that had made Cleveland the town in which to break a record, that had produced an Allan Freed (who coined the term "rock and roll" at WJW) and a Bill Randel (who introduced Elvis Presley to the North at WERE). Back not only to the music of that period (65% of WGAR's playlist is of the "oldies" category, the rest contemporary) but to the kind of Todd Storz-Gordon McLendon radio that swept all of America in the fifties. (The switchboard operator sings to callers, "This is WGAR, where your friends are.")

WGAR went forward past the "much more music" format to a fast-paced mixture of music and news, music and public service, music and political documentaries. "Cut them down to five minutes and run them five or eight times a day," says John Lund. "We don't stay in the background and just give them music to accompany whatever other activities each listener is involved in. We don't soothe the audience, we dazzle them."

Messrs. Thayer and Lund are old hands at dazzle radio, and old colleagues to boot. They first met at KLAC(AM) Los Angeles, then came together again at KXOA(AM) Sacramento before the move to WGAR. The problems there were of a different sort, but their approach to the solution was similar. It started with research, and with a group called Western Behavioral Sciences in La Jolla, Calif.

"I first became aware of them when I was managing KLAC and we were doing a two-way talk format," Mr. Thayer recalls. "They were involved in studying the sociological environment that has occurred around radio, and knew the implications of a major market such as Los Angeles where people were very lonely. People had no one to talk to, most of them were from out of town, felt uncomfortable and had no one to turn to. And so a radio station

that used the telephone-talk idea proved to be very successful as a community-binder type of operation."

"We went to them [after leaving KLAC] and asked—if we were not doing a talk format—how we could direct the format of a radio station to an age group. They helped us discover that there are certain emotional things that happen to people during the ages of about 15 to 22, all of which happen for the first time, and are important to them. Things like graduating from high school, wearing a tuxedo, staying out all night, having a fight with your parents, selecting a college, meeting the girl, buying the house, having a baby. All these things are great emotional triggers in a person's psychological make-up.

"The thing we discovered in doing a quality controlled test group," Mr. Thayer continued, "was that songs automatically triggered a response from them. They would hear a song and say, 'Oh, that reminded me of when I graduated from high school.' This happened around 1955 with the development of the transistor radio and the birth of rock and roll. A new kind of amalgamation was created, a medium, radio, that spoke directly to young people. The songs of 1955 and beyond started talking about marriage and divorce and kids and suicide. [The songs] weren't fantasy-type things anymore, they were really real."

"When we came to Cleveland," Mr. Thayer says, "we found that two stations were dominant. One was the Storer's WJW, which was programing nice, beautiful music and old line. We found that their audience, which should have been 35-plus, was 18-plus. We found that the rock-and-roll station in town, WIXY, which was then owned by Westchester Corp. and now by the Harlem Globetrotters, was getting listeners 35 and over. Our market research showed that both groups were dissatisfied with their radio stations. Young people who listened to the old-line station were not happy with it, and 40-year-olds who were listening to WIXY didn't want to be screamed at. What we then tried to find out," Mr. Thayer adds, "was how to bridge that generation gap from 18 to 49, where people could feel comfortable that it was their station."

"We felt from the start that the music was going to be almost 100% of our success," Mr. Lund admits. "And then we started broadening our scope, see-



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