

Why is radio advertising so damn dismal?

 By [Chris Mberdyk](#)

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Some say there are only two things certain about life. I say there are three - death, taxes, and that Loerie Awards announcement, "There is no Grand Prix for radio this year..."

I hope I am proved wrong this year, but unfortunately, even if I am, it will not be as a result of radio advertising having improved but rather the decision of an over sympathetic chairman of the judging panel.

Quite frankly, I have not found anyone in years in the wider marketing communications industry who believes radio advertising is any good. Not just in South Africa, but anywhere in the world.

Which is really very strange indeed because those same people will tell you that radio is an enormously powerful medium. All that good old theatre-of-the-mind stuff, which although hackneyed as hell, is actually quite true. It is a powerful medium because it has no visual element, not in spite of having no visible attraction.

Why it's so damn dismal

There are many reasons apparently why radio advertng is so damn dismal, one the main being that radio is such a competitive medium. So, there is no way in hell a station manager is going to refuse to accept a paid advertisement just because it's not good. Sure, sometimes they will very reluctantly pull and ad if it is highly offensive and if enough calls come in from listeners bitching about it. But I've never heard of any station consistently dumping ads.

One can hardly blame them - it's incredibly difficult to turn away money in the bank particularly when you have to sweat blood to put it there in the first place.

Another big problem is the position radio has in the general pecking order of media priorities.

Most big brands get the TV and print treatment and radio comes in as a sort of afterthought. Just using TV commercial dialogue for a radio commercial is not uncommon, nor is the reaction of clients to agencies when they suggest using the medium. "Yes ok, do a radio spot... but don't spend any money on it..."

Then, of course, one has a fairly typical situation on the creative side. The junior creatives are lumbered with radio. Which is really a problem because when you think about it, writing for radio is one of the most difficult copywriting jobs there is.

Only one shot

And unlike print or TV where the ad keeps going backwards and forwards between agency and client and agency and process/production house, radio ads seem to get only one shot at production and when the production team gets back from the studio and finds that no one else thinks their efforts are any good, the ad very rarely goes back to get properly fixed. It sort of gets tampered with, just enough to be passable.

South Africa has some great radio copywriters. They are the guys that have produced those few really wonderful commercials in years gone by. But they're not writing radio ads any longer because most of them now own ad agencies.

Quite apart from the fact that it is a crying shame that clients and creatives are not doing justice to what is an enormously powerful advertising medium, bad radio advertising is diminishing the integrity of radio. And it is no good trying to argue that it isn't.

Extremely sad

The most basic listenership research will probably tell you that more people switch channels because they are irritated with ads rather than with the programme content or presenter.

Even worse is that most listeners just close their minds to bad advertising which in turn has a negative effect on any sort of case history.

It's an understandable, logical, situation but nonetheless extremely sad because when one listens to great radio advertising - what little there is of it - one cannot but wonder at the sheer brilliance of it in terms of entertainment, selling power and the potential for enormously rewarding creative expression.

Oh and by the way, I have said this before. Twelve years ago in fact. And nothing has changed in the interim.

ABOUT CHRIS MOERDYK

Apart from being a corporate marketing analyst, advisor and media commentator, Chris Moerdyk is a former chairman of Bizcommunity. He was head of strategic planning and public affairs for BMW South Africa and spent 16 years in the creative and client service departments of ad agencies, ending up as resident director of Lindsay Smithers-FCB in KwaZulu-Natal. Email Chris on moerdykc@gmail.com and follow him on Twitter at [@chrismoerdyk](https://twitter.com/chrismoerdyk).

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