

Reaching society's conscience through the power of radio

In every society there is a need for someone to be the social conscience, to stand up for what is right, to speak out against what is wrong and to fight for the poor and oppressed. When it comes to getting people to find their humanity and empathy for those less fortunate and to dig deeply into their pockets to help, there is no more powerful medium than radio.

This is the opinion of Omar Essack, Executive Director and Head of Radio Broadcasting for Kagiso Media, owners of East Coast Radio.

"East Coast Radio has played a pivotal role in KZN in terms of social responsibility and giving back to the community it serves. We treat social responsibility as a function of cultural behaviour. We believe in ensuring that our corporate strategy and behaviour supports our strategic goal of building solid, trustworthy relationships with our listeners and advertisers," says Omar.

"As South Africans we are all only too painfully aware of the tremendous disparities of those living in wealth to those in abject poverty. People are fully aware of how much hardship there is out there but are often at a loss as to how they can help. When it comes to getting people to rally together and help the needy, radio is tremendously powerful because of its intimacy and ability to communicate with listeners on a one-to-one basis. Listeners build trust in and rapport with the presenter and this is the key success ingredient of radio in social conscience," explains Omar.

East Coast Radio's overwhelming support from listeners is a result of the great lengths management and team go to in building inroads into the local community, engendering trust and sincerity, tangibly demonstrating that East Coast Radio cares for its community. "When presenters make on-air appeals they are meaningful and usually deeply emotional, hence people further trust the brand. They know that every cent will go towards the cause. While someone may be less hesitant to give out money on the streets, having someone such as Alan and Sorisha or Damon and Mags - our morning and afternoon anchors - speak about someone in dire need strikes a chord with listeners as the appeal is so much more personal.

"In radio, listeners connect and have an affinity with a certain presenter and this is ultimately the strength of the medium. Talented presenters can run you through the gamut of emotions - they can make you laugh, they can annoy you, they can intrigue you and they can make you cry; they can tell stories that resonate with listeners - this is why radio can and must play a pivotal role in uplifting society," explains Omar.

A more recent example of East Coast Radio's active role in social responsibility is the shocking story of Bongani Ngonyan. Not satisfied with mugging him, thugs gouged out his eyes with a knife so that he would not be able to identify them - a 'simple' mugging left 19-year old Bongani without his sight and an even bleaker future.

The story had East Coast Radio listeners reeling in disbelief. The then newly launched Bokomo Big Breakfast show, hosted by Alan Khan and Sorisha Naidoo, brought the young victim into the studio and listeners were urged to call in and offer him help with future employment and his hospital bills. Independent Newspapers and East Coast Radio pooled resources and raised over R50 000. The station offered a further R10 000 reward to anyone providing information that would lead to an arrest and conviction.

Using the power of broadcasting to get listeners to help those in need started five years ago when Damon Beard - anchor of the afternoon drive-time show with co-host Mags - received a letter from a female listener who desperately needed a bus ticket to Cape Town to visit her dying mother. Touched by her appeal, Damon contacted a bus company and secured tickets for the family to travel to Cape Town.

"A few weeks later I received a letter from the listener thanking us for the tickets - they made it to Cape Town just in time as she was able to spend an hour or two with her mother before she passed away. This had a huge impact on the team and it struck me how something so seemingly small for many of us had made a lifelong difference to another human being. It was

there and then that "The Big Favour' became a permanent feature on the show, and every Wednesday we do our best to make one wish come true for an East Coast radio listener," explains Damon.

People send East Coast radio around 1500 emails and faxes every week, covering everything from life-threatening situations to something as small as a pair of running shoes.

"We receive incredible support from our sponsors and I believe a key reason is that they know exactly where their donations are going. I personally check out every single appeal and ensure that it is legitimate. We never give actual hard cash - we find sponsors to supply a specific item, such as a wheelchair for someone or a washing machine for a children's home. Many 'big favours' are done off-air and we receive countless donations from sponsors who are only too happy to help out, irrespective of the recognition for it," adds Damon.

Many have criticised the Big Favour, saying it's a PR ploy and done purely for the recognition. "Personally, I don't attach any value to these comments and opinions. The fact of the matter is that my position provides an awesome platform to help others and, secondly, we know from experience that the show goes a long way to restoring empathy and faith in humankind in a world that is constantly bombarded with negativity and violence. If every socially conscious act was shot down as a PR scam, this would indeed be a very, very sad place to live," he observed.

Radio has unrivalled power to act as the social conscience of people, but this brings a need for scrupulous responsibility and morality. "Humanity's great strength is empathy and when we lose empathy, we lose humanity - this is what happens in wars and most of the time this is driven by the media," explains Omar.

"One just has to look at the press headlines to see an illustration of this: the media paint a picture of Palestinians fighting Jews, Americans versus Iraqis - one is labelled the hero and one the villain - it's no longer about human beings. Radio has very real responsibility that comes with morality," warns Omar.

From an East Coast Radio perspective, management's stance is not about telling people who is the good guy and who the villain. "We want to tell listeners who is suffering and how they can help. In this way we also allow people to live vicariously through us - simply by supporting our station they feel they are doing something to support a good cause.

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