



**JOEL
RAAB**
COUNTRY RADIO &
MEDIA CONSULTING
JOEL@JOELRAAB.
COM

Getting Our 'Touch' Back During the Pandemic



No format touches listeners better, more strongly, or more often than Country radio. FM Country radio. Not satellite. Not Spotify, Pandora, or any other DSP. FM Country radio! So, from late spring through the early winter of 2020, with the pandemic raging, we found ourselves in a quandary. How do we now move the format forward and continue to grab and improve ratings in a crowded marketplace, with competition that goes beyond traditional FM radio?

Thinking caps are put on. How do we tap into the goodwill of our listeners, sponsors, and even owners who are now stretched to the limits, with advertising crashing? As a consultant to stations in major markets to unrated markets, I did what I could to make sure that our messaging captured the moment on-air. "Great to listen to in work clothes or pajamas ... The Bull!"

It was a fine line to walk, finding the humor amid the suffering, but I learned early that appropriate laughter has helped our listeners get through this rough time. Imaging was being updated more frequently in order to capture the nation's mood.

During the early months of the pandemic, Country radio did a fabulous job of giving listeners information they needed (some on an hourly basis). I saw ratings increase for those who stepped up to provide vital local information.

At one point, there was a question about "Should we or shouldn't we continue contesting?" Initially, it seemed like it might be a waste of money, yet one station I work with turned its planned "Commercial-Free Cash" into "Community Cash" to help out folks that needed it. The station (WAYZ/Hagerstown, Maryland) was rewarded with its best spring book in years.

Country artists stepped to the plate to help us out, too, by engaging with listeners in a way they never had before. Several partner stations conducted listener Zooms with major stars including Luke Bryan, Kelsea Ballerini, and the social media champion, Brad Paisley. The look on the listeners' faces when they got to see Brad Paisley and ask questions via a live Zoom chat was absolutely priceless. And let's not forget the sales implications of these special

events, which have included local and regional sponsors who otherwise might have left money on the table.

With listeners starved for live entertainment, artists and labels have come through with virtual live and recorded shows that have been presented by stations and groups. Some found ways to entertain listeners by getting involved with socially distanced concerts, featuring either local talent or major artists like Garth Brooks, who sent closed-circuit shows to drive-in theaters.

In the spring of 2020, Country overall as a format appeared to be rewarded in the ratings. My theory is that with more folks working from home, they could choose their radio format, and more chose Country (often at the expense of AC, which had been dictated at their workplaces).

The challenges for 2021 will be as great, if not greater. How will we continue to nurture our connection with our audience in new and innovative ways, given the hand we are dealt? Stay tuned.