

Please note the new partnership on this research as it becomes the RTDNA/Newhouse School at Syracuse University Survey. I am privileged to have joined the outstanding faculty at Syracuse. That's the name you'll see on the research from here on ... and that's what you'll see on the painfully long survey questionnaire later this fall.

Bob Papper

The Biggest Threat to Local Radio News by Bob Papper

The question on the latest RTDNA/Newhouse School at Syracuse University Survey was, "What do you perceive to be the biggest threat to the long-term health of your operation?"

It's the first time I've asked this question, but it generated just shy of 350 responses – that's a remarkable number for an open-ended question like this ... especially for the first time it's been asked.

While the primary concern in TV involved the fragmentation of the audience ... which ultimately threatens revenue ... the concern about money was much more direct in radio. Revenue issues came in the easy winner at 39.7%. Cuts in revenue, maintaining revenue, the downturn of the local economy, especially in smaller communities, shrinking population. The revenue concern came out on top for both commercial and non-commercial stations. While they have different funding sources, both are clearly feeling an economic strain.

In their own words:

- 100% cut in appropriated funding from our license holder (the university)
- 100% cut in state funding has put us at risk of losing our federal funding.
- Because we are a commercial radio station, we require the success of our advertisers. Internet has harmed the traditional brick and mortar stores' bottom lines and thus impacted their advertising budget. The internet has been a game changer and services like Amazon threaten our customers and as a result threaten us, too.
- Corporate media buying agreements. Advertising decisions are now moving to the corporate level; it's tougher to get ads/sponsorships from local franchises of chain businesses -- they are now referring us to corporate or tell us that those decisions are made at the corporate (i.e. regional/national) level.
- Diminishing local radio advertising
- Downturn in economy
- Economic health of local community

- Erosion of locally-owned advertising client base
- Falling advertising sales caused in part by aging area population
- Financial stability and fundraising. We've seen no growth and have lost positions through attrition over the past several years.
- Funding to Public Broadcasting. State of AK recently zeroed out all funding to Public Broadcasting.
- Funding. As a not-for-profit, being able to continue our operation and change with the times to seek audience on digital platforms for our content, will require funding for staff, equipment and marketing. Our funding comes from a mix of small govt grants, small university contribution, personal donations, business donations (underwriting), and small grants. All are challenging and time-intensive to seek, but necessary.
- Generating enough sales to keep news sponsored/news director employed.
- Having enough revenue for the station to continue to operate.
- Cost of doing business in a rural area
- Local businesses closing
- Operations budget. The cost of operating music stations has skyrocketed due to increased music license fees. That coupled with overtime rules, and a shrinking market means wages are stagnant or lower, leaving us unable to recruit qualified candidates. We also find ourselves now competing directly with public radio, which is attached to a university and essentially has an unlimited budget to hire and operate.
- Other digital competition and too many radio stations in market dilutes the revenue for all
- Revenue erosion. Small, locally-owned businesses are disappearing.
- As more of our audience becomes digital, how do we make that financially viable?
- The current governor vetoed ALL public broadcast support funds. Some of the stations in small, rural communities may not survive the loss.
- More commercial media are adopting member-funded models. That creates a new challenge for us in vying for the dollars of people who want to support news through donations instead of subscriptions.

In second place, at 25.2%, the fragmented audience and alternative sources for music, news and audio in general.

In their own words:

- Audience decline due to aging and fragmentation
- Additional sources of entertainment and music options as well as the declining number of local businesses.
- Online music listening and apathy for local government and community happenings.
- Audience support waning with alternative news sources available.
- Competing listening options, especially in cars.
- Disruption to audio news distribution, digital listening.
- Kids and adults turning to streaming services. Our hope is that at some point, they will care about what is going on in their communities and county.

- Overall decrease in radio listenership and generational shift to more online content consumption
- Overall declining radio listening. Our online traffic is up, but we're a public radio network and we're not seeing the same level of audience giving online as we do on the radio.
- People moving from radio to internet-based content, that is not bound by the FCC or the cost of running a commercial radio station.
- The Damn cell phones
- The mean age of our broadcast audience goes up every year. We need better ways to reach younger audiences on our platforms.
- Younger audiences are not tuning into AM radio as a source for their news yet. How do we draw them in?

Next came staffing issues, at 11.9%. A shortage of staff at the station, a difficulty to recruit and maintain staff, low salaries, and a difficulty in finding qualified salespeople.

In their own words:

- Finding qualified salespeople to sell our advertising space
- Employee burnout
- Financial pressure, lack of staffing
- Finding reliable, qualified employees.
- Keeping current staff with low pay.

Then there were corporate issues, at 7.2%. Station sales, budget cuts, management or ownership not interested in local news, consolidation, outside companies being hired to do local news.

In their own words:

- Lack of investment in local news gathering
- Funding from institution may be influenced by news content and aggressiveness of reporters.
- Automation and regional "local news content services"
- Budget concerns. Company not investing in personnel to keep the news local
- Continued consolidation due to financial constraints.
- Funding and editorial interference from the development department
- Incompetent management
- Outside agencies that promise cost-cutting station owners they'll provide local news content from another state at a fraction of the cost for a full-time employee.
- Ownership de-emphasizing local news

Trust in media, apathy toward news and news fatigue combined at 4.9%.

In their own words:

- A lack of trust for news media
- Apathy and negative attitude toward news media
- Distrust of traditional media
- Continued demonizing of journalism by political leaders.
- News fatigue: it's like a firehose when we're just trying to fill pails of water
- Young people's lack of knowledge about radio broadcasting and their constant use and trust in their handheld device. They believe all the hype surrounding FB, Twitter and all things digital and buy into the myth that radio is dead.
- Social media sites where people share false and misleading information

Technical issues hit 4.6%. Keeping up with technology – or not being able to keep up with it.

In their own words:

- Online streaming and podcasts. Our stations and corporation are too small to be able to afford all the costs associated with producing online material and royalties associated with those productions.
- AM radio not on phones
- Inability to keep up with technology advances on digital platforms to meet the needs of users (from ongoing mobile app and content development to updated CMS and web design)
- Not being able to keep up with modern technology

Not adapting to today's media landscape came in at 2.9%.

In their own words:

- Changing digital landscape and having the staff available to produce content.
- Digital news. We need to treat our digital content the same as on-air content.
- I feel like radio has a healthy future and potential to respond to the trends of consumers. The threats of social media and podcasts are also opportunities for radio and its personalities to branch out and utilize those new and alternate platforms to reach new listeners and connect with them.
- Lack of vision, flexibility and innovation on our part.
- Stagnancy, failure to grow and impart information in an entertaining way
- Staying ahead of the curve for how content is consumed.
- Technology. As technology evolves and more choice is offered to stream music/read news, we need to find ways to stay relevant and appealing to our audience
- That we won't be able to adapt quickly enough to digital disruption.

Other combined to reach 3.5%.

In their own words:

- Failure of the newspaper
- I'm not paid to give my opinion.
- Our station has been operating for 65 years so we feel that there will always be an audience for local small market radio.
- Sea-level rise
- Surveys like this!
- The decline of higher education.
- The dumbing-down of America.

About the Survey

The RTDNA/Newhouse School at Syracuse University Survey, funded in part by the Lawrence Herbert School of Communication at Hofstra University, was conducted in the fourth quarter of 2019 among all 1,702 operating, non-satellite television stations and a random sample of 3,427 radio stations. Valid responses came from 1,313 television stations (77.1%) and 673 radio news directors and general managers representing 1,996 radio stations. Some data sets (e.g. the number of TV stations originating local news, getting it from others and women TV news directors) are based on a complete census and are not projected from a smaller sample.

About Bob Papper

Bob Papper is Adjunct Professor of Broadcast and Digital Journalism at the S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications at Syracuse University and has worked extensively in radio and TV news.