Research Department
Report

Profiles of How Successful MRDs Got That Way–And Key MR Providers

Audience Research Analysis

Audience Measurement for Public Radio Puts Researcher in Cross Hairs

He calls himself a pragmatist, but public radio research executives and observers of non-commercial radio perceive David Giovannoni, President and Founder of Derwood, MD-based Audience Research Analysis (ARA) as everything from a "visionary" to a "numbers Nazi." Public radio is the professional love of the personally soft-spoken researcher, who is professionally reserved and politically savvy in expressing his opinions. Yet, his research for over two decades has stirred controversy and ruffled feathers.

Public radio is a medium largely shut off from commercial advertising (thereby nearly totally reliant on the generosity of its listenership) and historically opposed to the use of traditional commercial broadcasting methods to dictate programming. Since public radio's inception, the executives running these stations had possessed total freedom to select their programs, slot them as they desired and pay limited heed to their audience. But Giovannoni smashed that unquestioned control and became a lightning rod when, in the 1980s, he pioneered and cemented the use of audience measurement data by public radio stations and public radio networks.

Many entrenched local public radio station executives resented the imposition of research for the questions it raised and challenges it put front and center against their whims. Gradually – sometimes over some very vocal objections – Giovannoni converted numerous programmers, stations and licensees to see things his way. Admire him or hate him, a *New York Times* profile last November noted his widespread contributions to public radio, likening him to the field's leading guru. He "invented the language of public radio, terms like *affinity*, *loyalty*, *power* and *public service*. The phrase most public stations intone in their hourly IDs – *listener supported* – grew out of Giovannoni's research," said reporter Samuel G. Freedman.

Giovannoni demonstrated that the same data used as commercial radio advertising currency could be cast in a public

service light and framed to help public broadcasters better serve their 20 million-plus weekly listeners. ARA clients now include the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, National Public Radio (NPR), Public Radio International (the second largest, less-heralded public radio network) and over 150 public radio stations (most of them NPR members). ARA's annual client churn is less than 3%, and why not since its work has factored in NPR's doubled listenership (22 million, versus 9 million in 1985) and the network's evolution from near bankruptcy to financial stability (with two million paid-up members – versus half that number in 1990) in the face of diminished federal support (from 16¢ to 11¢ per dollar raised).

Public radio does not draw the mass audiences or audience segments that attract major advertising dollars. When the FCC set aside frequencies below 92 MHz on the FM band exclusively for public broadcasting, it established a tradition of radio programming untainted by commercial interests. Public radio built a reputation as the place to find a hodgepodge of educational, cultural and off-beat programs.

An avid listener and staunch proponent of public radio dating back to his college days in the early 1970s, Giovannoni understands the peril inherent in advising public radio about fulfilling its audiences' desires. "It's a difficult act to balance and a legitimate concern," he told *RDR*, "because once one starts counting listeners, the audience size can become an end in itself. Unchecked by considerations of the 'public good', this would be disastrous for public radio."

"It's one thing to come up with an academic concept like public service; it's quite another thing to operationalize it, to turn it into tools, research reports and analyses that people can examine on a regular basis," said Giovannoni, who began his public radio advisory services armed with a hand-held calculator and raw Arbitron data in the late-1970s. "Back then, measuring how many people were listening to a non-commercial radio program was anathema to many people in the industry," he recounted."

Giovannoni began analyzing syndicated research for public radio in 1977 to supplement his income while a graduate student at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. He and his mentor, Professor Larry Lichty, took Arbitron data they were using to teach their students and wrote some modest programs that analyzed the information and produced figures commonly used by commercial broadcast interests. "We took basic numbers like AQH (average audience listening at a given time) and cume (the number of different people listening over time) and created a third number: time spent listening, or the average amount of time that a person who tunes into the station listens during the week," Giovannoni detailed. "It's a simple and rote calculation, but it wasn't in the Arbitron book."

When Dr. Lichty became a consultant for National Public Radio in 1979, Giovannoni joined him at the Washington, DC headquarters. NPR at the time was forging a resurgence in public radio programming. The award winning "All Things Considered" had begun in 1971 and "Morning Edition" was just debuting. It contracted with him to aggregate local audience estimates and turn them into local program audience estimates. NPR's programming momentum had spurred an interest in audience numbers, particularly on a national level.

"NPR's VP-Programming recognized the value of national audience data to underscore for Congress or a potential underwriter the value of a program," Giovannoni explained. "When the old style radio networks died out and television took over, national audience estimates for radio became scarce. Data became all market based," he continued. "My job was to take that local audience data and turn it into national audience data at the program level." It took two years, but Giovannoni, a self-taught computer programmer working with the Brookings Institution's (Washington, DC) mainframe computer, directed the creation of such a system. "We were told in 1981 that our code was the largest program ever written on the Brookings mainframe," he reminisced.

In appreciation of the value of his work, Giovannoni was appointed NPR's Director of Audience Research and Program

Evaluation and charged with building out the research department. When he began, the department knew station clearance for national programs at all times. Giovannoni brought in the dimension of audience.

Giovannoni began sharing market-level data with NPR affiliate stations as a benefit of their membership. The support he enjoyed on the network side was not immediately replicated by the affiliates. "Member stations often assumed that there was an agenda," he confessed. To lend an air of legitimacy and credibility to the NPR numbers, Giovannoni chose to remain an independent consultant. "I ran NPR's research department, hired and fired people, but was never on staff," he elaborated. "That allowed me to analyze the numbers and honestly state their accuracy, without the implied spin or sales pitch that a station might feel from an NPR employee."

In 1986, Giovannoni left NPR and his team of four researchers to devote himself entirely to his consulting practice, Audience Research Analysis. His timing was right. Efforts by the Reagan Administration and some in Congress to sharply curtail public funding for the Corporation for Public Broadcasting made fulfillment of public radio listener desires more important (to prove to the government the value of federal dollars in public broadcasting, and to please listeners sufficiently to continue to grow their financial support).

Though he had done some work for commercial stations in the mid-1980s, Giovannoni decided to focus on public radio and in 1989 developed AudiGraphics™ to analyze syndicated data. Public stations began buying the product. "It puts Arbitron data and the listening of your audience in a context appropriate to public service," outlined Giovannoni. "AudiGraphics tells you when your listeners are listening to your station, when they are listening to other radio stations and puts that listening into perspective," he continued. "When public radio listeners are listening to radio, but not public radio, we believe there is probably a programming solution."

Giovannoni learned that programming gaffes are often traceable to public radio's roots, which are deeply embedded in educational institutions. Among other things his research discovered a serious problem with public radio station program continuity. "Traditionally, a station might feature an hour of opera, then a lecture and then some jazz with a highly-moderated discussion of the music. These were things that were scarcely available elsewhere, but that also didn't necessarily fit together," he summarized.

His findings led him to highlight important and, at the same time, delicate issues for public radio stations. He committed himself not to tell any one of his clients what to do, but to provide what *The New York Times* in its recent profile of Giovannoni described as "information of unimpeached accuracy to executives who use it to act on intuition, personal tastes and informal feedback from listeners."

"We've worked very hard over the years to help stations understand they are operating in the medium of radio. It's bigger than their programming schedule. We encourage them to consider the impact on audience loyalty of airing a show every other week or once a month, which was very common 25 years ago. You need to pay attention to what you air, when it is aired, what it is adjacent to, to whom it appeals and how important it is in listeners' lives," he told *RDR*.

Giovannoni stresses to clients that their first responsibility is to their listeners, not to genres or program producers. Niche programs like bluegrass or live Metropolitan Opera broadcasts may have vociferous proponents, but placed on the wrong stations at the wrong times they can actually drive away larger numbers of otherwise loyal listeners. "When a station moves or removes such a niche program, there is often hell to pay in the press and among organized groups of listeners," says Giovannoni. "But when the program change is well-researched, well-considered and well-implemented, more people ultimately find the station is more important in their lives. From a public service perspective, the short-term pain typically results in long-term gain."

Giovannoni knew that listeners needed consideration, too. "A station should appeal to the same type of listener all the time," he counsels. "I am not suggesting the program genre has to be homogeneous, but the station does need homogeneity of focus on type of listener. Mine that audience and serve it exceedingly well." He knows that the psychographic profile of an NPR news or classical music listener does not vary from market to market, but they do exist in different concentrations in different markets.

Competition was another concept that required comprehension and attention. It comes from commercial and even other public stations in the same market, so public stations must differentiate themselves from one another. "Offering 'alternative' program-ming came into vogue, but that wasn't a solution because all that says is what you are not. You aren't making a positive statement as to what you are," advised Giovannoni.

Critics have charged that counting listeners could ultimately mean that only the most popular public radio formats, such as news, will survive, while small but intensely dedicated special niches (e.g., bluegrass music) fall to the wayside. "I am not a proponent of one type of programming over another. What we try to do with all of our clients is to get them to think about what they want to be – then help them be the best they can. Whether it is all news or all jazz – the issue is finding the right mix," he reasoned. "I've been working for decades to get people to pay attention to their listeners and make programming choices that increase their value to those listeners."

Giovannoni acknowledges that public service and financial support must be balanced. "A great example of how those two bottom lines interplay is the dreaded pledge drive," he volunteered. "As we are forced to be more self-sufficient, the listener becomes much more important – not only their number, but their satisfaction as well. It would be very easy for public radio to go on the air much more than it does today to raise more money," he volunteered, "but every moment you are on the air asking for money, you are not serving the audience with the programming they came for."

Giovannoni added that ARA last year released a strategic tool to minimize the amount of on-air fundraising a station must do, while maximizing the return-per-hour on each pledge drive, as well as a suite of tools that combine audience and financial data to help stations make better financial decisions. "It's all about increasing that financial bottom line, but not at the expense of serving the listener," he reasoned. "You can do well by doing good, but you need tools and analytical systems to help you make decisions toward that end."

Giovannoni's research has understandably studied supporters of public radio. In 1998, his research concluded that music programming brought stations far less income per broadcast hour than news, talk or entertainment. He can recite minute details about the 40% of NPR "cume" listeners who account for almost 80% of hours tuned to public radio. Still, he advocates risk taking and "budgeting for failure."

Giovannoni does not advocate that public radio stations focus heavily on those listeners most likely to open their wallets and support public radio. He related an amusing incident to underscore that point. "I once took an advanced statistics course with a team of people from the Internal Revenue Service. Over lunch, we talked about why they were at the class and they said it was to help them hone their statistical model to find the 'high-yield audit'. Public radio does not seek the 'high-yield listener'. It does, however, seek to serve significant audiences with significant programming – program-ming that is important in peoples' lives, programming they would miss if it went away. Our clients use our research to make their programs and stations even more important to even more people. That's what public service is all about… isn't it?"

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