Checklist

Creating Effective Radio Commercials

- Make the big idea crystal clear. Concentrate on one main selling point (which must be on strategy). Radio is a good medium for building brand awareness, but not for making long lists of copy points or complex arguments.
- Mention the advertiser's name early and often. If the product or company name is tricky, consider spelling it out.
- Take time to set the scene and establish the premise. A 30-second commercial that nobody remembers is a waste of money. Fight for 60-second spots.
- Use familiar sound effects. ice tinkling in a glass, birds chirping, or a door shutting can create a visual image. Music also works if its meaning is clear.
- Paint pictures with your words. Use descriptive language to make the ad more memorable.
- Make every word count. Use active voice and more verbs than adjectives. Be conversational. Use pronounceable words and short sentences.
- Be outrageous. The best comic commercials begin with a totally absurd premise from which all developments follow logically. But remember, if you can't write humor really well, go for drama.
- Ask for the order. Try to get listeners to take action.
- Remember that radio is a local medium. Adjust your commercials to the language of your listeners and the time of day the spots will run.
- Presentation counts a lot. Even the best scripts look boring on paper. Acting, timing, vocal quirks, and sound effects bring them to life.

Copywriting for Electronic Media

For electronic media, the fundamental elements—the five steps of the creative pyramid—remain the primary guides, but the copywriting formats differ. Radio and television writers prepare scripts and storyboards.

Writing Radio Copy

A script resembles a two-column list. On the left side, speakers' names are arranged vertically, along with descriptions of any sound effects (abbreviated SFX) and music. The right column contains the dialogue, called the audio.

Copywriters first need to understand radio as a medium. Radio provides entertainment or news to listeners who are busy doing something else—driving, washing dishes, reading the paper, or even studying. To be heard, an advertising message must be catchy, interesting, and unforgettable. Radio listeners usually decide within five to eight seconds if they're going to pay attention. To attract and hold the attention of listeners, particularly those not attracted to a product category, radio copy must be intrusive.

Intrusive, yes; offensive, no. An insensitive choice of words, an overzealous effort to attract listeners with irritating everyday sounds (car horn, alarm clock, screeching tires), or characters that sound too exotic, odd, or dumb can cause listener resentment and ultimately lose sales. Tom Bodett's often-imitated ads for Motel 6 demonstrate the effectiveness of a personal, relaxed, and natural style. Other guidelines are given in the Checklist, "Creating Effective Radio Commercials."

One of the most challenging aspects is making the script fit the time slot. The delivery changes for different types of commercials, so writers must read...
Healthier America
Lost Campaign
Radio: 60
"Neighbor"
Expiration date: 2/23/05

SFX: Phone ringing
Bill: Hello...?
George: Hi, Bill! This is George Dewey from up the street.
Bill: Hey, George. How ya doin?" George:
Good, good. Say, I noticed you’ve been walking to work these days instead of driving…and I, uh, don’t quite know how to say this, but...but...
Bill: But what?
George: (stammering) But...But...Your butt, your buttocks, your butt—I think I found your butt on my front lawn. Have you recently lost it?
Bill: As a matter of fact, I have, George (pleased) It’s about time someone noticed.
George: (playful) Well, it was kinda hard to miss if you know what I mean... ...Anyways, would you like it back?
Bill: Would I like it back? No, not really.
George: So, it’s okay if I throw it out?
Bill: Sure, that’s fine. Take it easy, George.

SFX: Phone ringing
Announcer: Small step #8—Walk instead of driving whenever you can. It’s just one of the many small steps you can take to help you become a healthier, well, you. Get started at www.smallstep.gov and take a small step to get healthy.

Legal: A public service announcement brought to you by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and the Ad Council.

A radio script format resembles a two-column list, with speakers’ names and sound effects on the left and the dialogue in a wider column on the right. This national public service announcement (PSA) was created by McCann-Erickson and is one of many in a campaign designed to inspire Americans to take small steps toward a healthier lifestyle.

the script out loud for timing. With electronic compression, recorded radio ads can now include 10 to 30 percent more copy than text read live. Still, the following is a good rule of thumb:

10 seconds: 20–25 words
20 seconds: 40–45 words
30 seconds: 60–70 words
60 seconds: 130–150 words

Radio writing has to be clearer than any other kind of copywriting. For example, the listener can’t refer back, as in print, to find an antecedent for a pronoun. Likewise, the English language is so full of homonyms (words that sound like other words) that one can easily confuse the meaning of a sentence (“who’s who is whose”).

Writing Television Copy

Radio’s basic two-column script format also works for television. But in a TV script, the left side is titled “Video” and the right side “Audio.” The video column describes the visuals and production: camera angles, action, scenery, and stage directions. The audio column lists the spoken copy, sound effects, and music.

Broadcast commercials must be believable and relevant. Even zany commercials must exude quality in their creation and production to imply the product’s quality. While the art director’s work is very important, the copywriter typically sets the tone of the commercial, establishes the language that determines which visuals to use, and pinpoints when the visuals should appear. Research shows the techniques given in the Checklist, “Creating Effective TV Commercials” work best.

To illustrate these principles, let’s look at a particular commercial. Many people want smooth, soft skin and consider a patch of rough, flaky skin anywhere on their body a disappointment. If you were the copywriter for Lubriderm skin lotion, how would you approach this somewhat touchy, negative subject?

The creative staff of J. Walter Thompson crafted an artistic solution for Lubriderm. An alligator was the big idea. The gator’s scaly sheath was a metaphor for rough, flaky skin. Its appearance ignited people’s survival instincts; they paid attention, fast. A beautiful, sophisticated woman with smooth, feminine skin was seated in a lounge chair, completely unruffled by the passing gator. The swing of the animal’s back and tail echoed the graceful curves of the two simple pieces of furniture on the set, and its slow stride kept the beat of a light jazz tune.
Creating Effective TV Commercials

- **Begin at the finish.** Concentrate on the final impression the commercial will make. And be sure that final impression is on strategy.
- **Create an attention-getting opening.** An opening that is visually surprising or full of action, drama, humor, or human interest sets the context and allows a smooth transition to the rest of the commercial.
- **Use a situation that grows naturally out of the sales story.** Avoid distracting gimmicks. Make it easy for viewers to identify with the characters.
- **Characters are the living symbol of the product.** They should be appealing, believable, nondistracting, and most of all, relevant.
- **Keep it simple.** The sequence of ideas should be easy to follow. Keep the number of elements in the commercial to a bare minimum.
- **Write concise audio copy.** The video should carry most of the weight. Fewer than two words per second is effective for demonstrations. For a 60-second commercial, 101 to 110 words is most effective; more than 170 words is too talky.
- **Make demonstrations dramatic but believable.** They should always be true to life and avoid the appearance of camera tricks.
- **Let the words interpret the picture and prepare viewers for the next scene.** Some of the best TV ads communicate just as well with the sound turned off. Use conversational language; avoid “ad talk,” hype, and puffery.
- **Run scenes for five or six seconds on average.** Rarely should a scene run less than three seconds. Offer a variety of movement-filled scenes without “jumping.”

This commercial opened with an attention-getting big idea that was visually surprising, compelling, dramatic, and interesting. It was also a quasi-demonstration: we saw the alligator's scaly, prickly skin and the woman's confidence and willingness to touch the alligator as it passed by, which symbolized the confidence Lubriderm can bring.

This ad follows the creative pyramid. The alligator captures attention visually while the announcer's first words serve as an attention-getting headline: “A quick reminder.” The ad commands us to listen and sets up the interest step that offers this claim: “Lubriderm restores lost moisture to heal your dry skin and protect it.” Now for the credibility step: “Remember, the one created for dermatologists is the one that heals and protects.” And then the desire step recaps the primary product benefit and adds a touch of humor: “See you later, alligator.”

The Role of Art in Radio and TV Advertising

According to Advertising Age columnist Bob Garfield, the best commercial in the world in 1997 was from Delvico Bates, Barcelona, for Esencias hand cream. The spot opens with a woman riding her bicycle to the persistent squeak of its unlubricated chain. She dismounts, opens a jar of Esencias, and rubs some of the cream onto the chain. Then she rides away—but the squeak is still there. Why? Because, as the voice-over points out, “Esencias moisturizes, but it has no grease.”
After the initial concepts for a television ad are finalized, creatives develop a storyboard rough composed of small sketches that depict the various scenes of the ad. The storyboard rough is used to present the creative concept to the account team and the client.


Developing the Artistic Concept for Commercials

Creating the concept for a radio or TV commercial is similar to creating the concept for print ads. The first step is to determine the big idea. Then the art director and copywriter must decide what commercial format to use. Should a celebrity present the message? Or should the ad dramatize the product's benefits with a semifictional story? The next step is to write a script containing the necessary copy or dialogue plus a basic description of any music, sound effects, and/or camera views.

In both radio and TV, the art director assists the copywriter in script development. But in television, artistic development is much more extensive. Using the TV script, the art director creates a series of *storyboard roughs* to present the artistic approach, the action sequences, and the style of the commercial.

Good casting is critical. The most important consideration is relevance to the product; agencies don't use a comic to sell financial products—or cremation services. And in spite of Michael Jordan's success for Nike, Gatorade, and McDonald's, some experts don't believe in using celebrities. David Ogilvy, for example, thought viewers remember the celebrity more than the product. 38

Formats for Radio and TV Commercials

Similar to print advertising, the format for a broadcast ad serves as a template for arranging message elements into a pattern. Once the art director and copywriter establish the big idea, they must determine the commercial's format.

Many radio and TV commercial styles have been successful. Here we consider eight common commercial formats that can be used in either radio or television: *straight announcement, presenter, testimonial, demonstration, musical, slice of life, lifestyle, and animation.*
Presenter commercials often use celebrities, experts, or actors playing a role. Jack has been well established as the spokesperson for Jack in the Box. Here, Jack shares the stage with his son, in an execution that does an excellent job reinforcing the name of Jack's new Ciabatta sandwich.

"Spelling Bee": 30
(Open on boy standing on stage at a grade school spelling bee)
Boy #1: Ciabatta. C-B-A... (Buzzer sounds. Cut to the next contestant)

Girl: Ciabatta. C-A... (Buzzer sounds. Cut to the next contestant)
Boy #2: Can you use it in a sentence? (Cut to Jack, buzzer in hand, officiating the spelling bee off stage)

Jack: My original Ciabatta burger is made with a juicy jumbo patty topped with green leaf lettuce, onions, tomatoes, pickles and a zesty sauce all served on delicious, lightly toasted ciabatta bread. (Cut to shot of Ciabatta burger and accompaniments)

Boy #2: J... (Buzzer sounds)
(Bag drops)
Bag 1: Original Ciabatta Burger
Bag 2: Experience Ciabatta
(Cut to next contestant with Jack-in-the-Box head on stage)


Straight Announcement

The oldest and simplest type of radio or TV commercial and probably the easiest to write is the straight announcement. One person, usually a radio or TV announcer, delivers the sales message. Music may play in the background. Straight announcements are popular because they are adaptable to almost any product or situation. In radio, a straight announcement can also be designed as an integrated commercial—that is, it can be woven into a show or tailored to the style of a given program.

For TV, an announcer may deliver the sales message on camera or off screen, as a voice-over, while a demonstration, slide, or film shows on screen. If the script is well written and the announcer convincing, straight announcements can be very effective. Since they don’t require elaborate production facilities, they save money, too.

Presenter

The presenter commercial uses one person or character to present the product and carry the sales message. Some presenters are celebrities, such as Catherine Zeta-Jones for T-Mobile. Others may be experts, such as corporate officers (Lee...
lacrocca) or professionals (doctors), or they may be actors playing a role (the
lonely Maytag repairman). A man-on-the-street may interview real people and get
them to share their thoughts about a client’s products or services. And, of course,
a presenter doesn’t have to be a real person. Remember Tony the Tiger?

A radio personality, such as Rush Limbaugh or Larry King, may ad lib an
ad message live in his or her own style. Done well, such commercials can be
very successful, as evidenced by the initial success of Snapple. However, the
advertiser surrenders control to the personality.

Testimonial

The true testimonial—where a satisfied user tells how effective the product
is—can be highly credible in both TV and radio advertising. Celebrities may
gain attention, but they must be believable and not distract from the product.
Actually, people from all walks of life endorse products, from known personal-
ities to unknowns and nonprofessionals. Which type of person to use depends
on the product and the strategy. Satisfied customers are the best sources for tes-
timonials because their sincerity is usually persuasive. Ogilvy suggested shoot-
ing candid testimonials when the subjects don’t know they’re being filmed. Of
course, advertisers must be sure to get their permission before using the piece.

Demonstration

Television is uniquely suited to visual demonstrations. And a demonstration
convinces an audience better and faster than a spoken message. So don’t say it,
show it. Naturally, it’s easier to demonstrate the product on TV than on radio,
but some advertisers have used the imaginative nature of radio to create humor-
ous, tongue-in-cheek demonstrations.

Products may be demonstrated in use, in competition, or before and after. These techniques help viewers visualize how the product will perform for them.

Musical

The musical commercials, or jingles, we hear on radio and TV are among
the best—and worst—ad messages produced. Done well, they can bring enor-
mous success, well beyond the average nonmusical commercial. Done poorly,
they can waste the advertising budget and annoy audiences beyond belief.

Advertisers have three sources of music. They can buy the right to use a
tune from the copyright owner, which is usually expensive. They can use a
melody in the public domain, which is free. Or they can hire a composer to
write an original song. Some original tunes, including Coke’s famous “I’d like to
teach the world to sing,” have become hits.

Slice of Life (Problem Solution)

A commercial that dramatizes a real-life situation is called slice of life. It usually
starts with just plain folks, played by professional actors, discussing some problem
or issue. Often the situation deals with a problem of a personal nature: bad breath,
loose dentures, dandruff, body odor, or yellow laundry. A relative or a co-worker
drops the hint, the product is tried, and the next scene shows the result—a hap-
pier, cleaner, more fragrant person off with a new date. The drama always con-
cludes with a positive outcome. Such commercials can get attention and create
interest, even though they are often irritating to viewers and hated by copywriters.

The key to effective slice-of-life commercials is simplicity. The ad should
concentrate on one product benefit and make it memorable. Often a
mnemonic device (a technique that helps you remember something) can
dramatize the product benefit and trigger instant recall. Users of Imperial margarine, for example, suddenly discover crowns on their heads.

Believability in slice-of-life commercials is difficult to achieve. People don’t really talk about “the sophisticated taste of Taster’s Choice,” so the actors must be highly credible to pull it off. That’s why most local advertisers don’t use the slice-of-life technique. Creating that believability takes very professional talent and money. In all cases, the story should be relevant to the product and simply told.

**Lifestyle**

To present the user rather than the product, advertisers may use the *lifestyle technique*. For example, Diesel pitches its denim to urbanites by showing characters working and playing while wearing its latest line. Likewise, beer and soft-drink advertisers frequently target their messages to active, outdoorsy young people, focusing on who drinks the brand rather than on specific product advantages.

**Animation**

Cartoons, puppet characters, and demonstrations with computer-generated graphics are very effective *animation* techniques for communicating difficult messages and reaching specialized markets, such as children. The way aspirin or other medications affect the human system is difficult to explain. Animated pictures of headaches and stomachs can simplify the subject and make a demonstration clear and understandable.

Computer animation requires a great deal of faith on the part of advertisers. Since most of this very expensive work is done on the computer, there’s nothing to see until the animation is well developed and a good bit of money has been spent (this is more fully discussed in Chapter 10).

**Basic Mechanics of Storyboard Development**

After the creative team selects the big idea and the format for a TV commercial, the art director and the writer develop the script. Television is so visually powerful and expressive that the art director’s role is particularly important. Art directors must be able to work with a variety of professionals—producers,

Ads that appeal to lifestyle present the type of user associated with the product, rather than the product itself. This ad for MasterCard is aimed at sports fans, and specifically Boston Red Sox fans, who are willing to do just about anything for their team.

**VO:** Red Sox World Series tickets
Baseball Enthusiast #1: Five hundred bucks.
Man Waiting in Line: I'd pay four grand.
Girl #1: Two months' salary.
Weightlifter: ... my entire savings account.

**Man with Painted Face:** Anything, anything.
Little Boy: My fish.
Young Woman: My dog.
Weightlifter: My girlfriend.

**Fan at Ballpark:** My first-born kid.
Girl #3: Really.
**VO/Super:** Seeing the Red Sox in the World Series: Priceless.

**VO/Super:** There are some things money can't buy.
**VO/Super:** For everything else there's MasterCard.
**VO/Super:** Devoted fan of the devoted fans.
directors, lighting technicians, and set designers—to develop and produce a commercial successfully. Producing ads will be discussed in the next chapter.

**Storyboard Design**

Once the basic script is completed, the art director must turn the video portion of the script into real images. This is done with a **storyboard**, a sheet preprinted with a series of 8 to 20 blank windows (frames) in the shape of TV screens. Below each frame is room to place the text of the commercial, including the sound effects and camera views. The storyboard works much like a cartoon strip.

Through a process similar to laying out a print ad (thumbnail, rough, comp) the artist carefully designs how each scene should appear, arranging actors, scenery, props, lighting, and camera angles to maximize impact, beauty, and mood. The storyboard helps the creatives visualize the commercial’s tone and sequence of action, discover any conceptual weaknesses, and make presentations for final management approval. It also serves as a guide for filming.

Even when designed to the level of a comp, though, the storyboard is only an approximation of the final commercial. Actual production often results in many changes in lighting, camera angle, focal point, and emphasis. The camera sees many things that the artist couldn’t visualize, and vice versa.

**Animatic: The Video Comp**

To supplement the storyboard or pretest a concept, a commercial may be taped in rough form using amateur talent as actors. Or an **animatic** may be shot—a film strip of the sketches in the storyboard accompanied by the audio portion of the commercial synchronized on tape. A standard animatic costs more than $10,000 to produce, but computers
are cutting costs dramatically. Avid Technologies, for example, developed a Macintosh-based editing system that lets the agency create moving pictures on the screen, lay sound behind them, and transfer the entire package onto videotape to send to the client. This system cuts the cost to produce testable material from about $10,000 to $1,000. This kind of technology is being adopted by many agencies as they look for ways to better serve clients’ creative needs for less money.

Upon approval of the storyboard and/or the animatic, the commercial is ready for production, a subject we cover in detail in Chapter 10.