

PROMOTING YOUR MUSIC WITH RADIO STATIONS

1. Radio has become crucial to the marketing of virtually every artist seeking a long-term career.
2. We must learn to differentiate between our expectations of public service radio and commercial radio.
3. The number of records being released by new artists in most markets, including Ireland, has reached saturation levels, making it increasingly difficult for new artists to make an impact.
4. While well-argued pressure on public service stations can sometimes be effective, commercial stations generally resent efforts to bully them into playing records which they feel may adversely affect their commercial viability.
5. According to national surveys, the radio programmes in Ireland with the highest listenerships are those which feature virtually no music at all.
6. Musicians, and those who promote their work, need to become more familiar with the content and programming policy of each radio station they wish to target.
7. In pursuing airplay, recording artists are advised to present themselves and their material in a manner most likely to generate constructive support and exposure.
8. Some radio station personnel object to pressure from local artists, managers, songwriters etc. who themselves do not support the local music industry.
9. An assumption of a right to have one's work used on commercial radio is not helpful and may be counter-productive.
10. Nearly all radio stations have some, often several, individuals who are actively supportive of new music and local artists. Musicians should seek to develop contact with those individuals.

ADVICE FOR ARTISTS AND SONGWRITERS

Changing Times Needs Changing Attitudes

It is becoming glaringly obvious that musicians and songwriters who are seriously trying to establish a commercial career in music will have to accept that the days when emotional blackmail could be used to force radio stations to play specific types of music are more or less over. The increase in competition, not just from other radio stations but also from TV and other entertainment sources, means that radio stations are increasingly making decisions based on ensuring their commercial survival. Fortunately, in most stations there are individuals supportive of new music who will be as genuinely helpful as possible, but

this can only be within the parameters of their own commercial circumstances.

But radio stations are increasingly saying, at least privately if not publicly, that they pay, as they see it, for giving exposure to records and artists and songs, and they are becoming increasingly resentful of people then trying to tell them what they must play as well. So if a musician/songwriter wants his/her record or song played on specific stations it will have to conform to that station's requirements and enable the station to feel that they are making their own decision to play it rather than being bullied into playing it.

The Wrong Approach

As if trying to make that all-important first break into a highly competitive industry wasn't difficult enough, new artists may unfairly suffer because of the behaviour of those who have preceded them. Over the past year, in meeting and listening to radio station personnel in every part of the country, there has hardly been a station which has not had at least one producer or presenter complaining about the unreliability of artists in some way or other.

At its worst, this lack of professionalism can manifest itself in the way acts turn up late for booked interviews, or even don't turn up at all. It can also be seen in the way many of them promise to send CDs, tapes, biogs or concert tickets and don't follow through. We've been told of specific instances where artists were scheduled for interviews and simply didn't turn up, with no advance warning received and no subsequent apology offered.

This kind of behaviour not only reflects badly on all artists but it usually puts the radio programme to considerable inconvenience, as they may have to scramble around at the last minute for replacement material. It also plays into the hands of individuals in stations who may already have a negative attitude towards new artists anyway. So why hand them more ammunition on a plate?

Artists of every hue need to be aware that radio stations no longer have the time nor the patience nor the inclination to deal with inconsiderate artistic foibles and much work needs to be done to restore faith in the reliability of new artists with many people in Irish radio.

The Right Approach

The likelihood of getting radio coverage or not can often depend on the attitude, reputation, reliability, behaviour, knowledge and actions of musicians and those who work for them.

Some of those who are disgruntled about what radio stations play feel that the best approach is to lash out publicly. Since we live in a democracy, any person is free to criticise radio stations for not doing this or that, but there has been a sea change within Irish radio which suggests that the days of trying to bully them into playing records is over.

Most sensible radio people accept that it is an acknowledgement of the importance of radio that makes airplay so coveted. But over the past year we became aware of artists who, perhaps honestly and courageously, publicly criticised radio stations but subsequently lost out by having stations and programmes ignore their records and other activities. News of their comments also spread to other stations and the overall effect was extremely negative and unhelpful. In one instance we were told of an artist who had complained bitterly on air

about the fact that a record by him, which the station had just played, had been issued without his permission, etc. While one can understand his ire if this were true, it is unreasonable of artists to expect radio stations to have to check out the provenance of every record before they play it, especially as in this case it came from a long-established and reputable label. This matter would have been more effectively dealt with through the artist taking it up with the record company in question.

Of course, musicians and others may feel that they should speak their minds as they see fit, but they might like to take into consideration that there may be an unwelcome price to pay for doing so. It would be far more sensible and more beneficial to decide instead to work with radio rather than against it, bearing in mind that many stations believe that artists wishing to get coverage on stations need to get some of the basics right too.

Demo Recordings

The matter of Demo tapes and CDs is rarely far from the minds of Irish radio stations under pressure to support new talent. Perhaps because of the pioneering work in this area by Dave Fanning and Ian Wilson of 2FM, who had a policy of using demos on the station's Rock Show from the beginning, there is a perception among commercial radio stations that they are expected to follow suit.

But there are two major problems. The increasing number of actual CD releases from new artists has reached a level of saturation where virtually nobody can deal with it, including the media and the public. Many of these records are themselves of unsuitable quality according to many of the stations expected to air them. But those CDs still tend to be generally far superior to the demo recordings submitted.

Demo recordings received on cassette are unlikely to be played at all except under special circumstances, while Demo CDs may be played if they fit the format of specialist programmes only. Stations believe that there is an expectation to play demo recordings in Ireland that does not apply in other countries and we have been challenged to find any major local station in the UK which regularly broadcasts demos. So far, we must confess, we have been unable to find any outlet on UK radio for demos other than John Peel who may occasionally use them on his BBC/World Service programmes. Radio stations seem in general to feel that they have enough to deal with in the plethora of new releases they receive on a daily basis and have little need for or interest in Demos. If submitted at all, it would seem Demos should only be sent to specialist programmes which have a stated policy of using them.

Who to Send Them To

It is absolutely essential to ensure that all records, whether demos or actual commercial releases, are sent to the right person or programme. Just because, say, the newscaster might be a station's best-known celebrity, it doesn't mean there's any value in sending him/her copies of records, although that seems to happen far too often. The same argument can be made in relation to someone who might have a relation or a neighbour or some acquaintance in a particular station. If they're not part of the programming team, sending them records is probably a waste of time and money. Instead, artists and those who work with them should either address copies of records to the Music Programmer, if they don't

have an actual name, and/or to the producer or presenter of specific programmes which they believe might play the kind of music featured on the disc.

Listen To the Radio

It is often privately irritates radio station personnel that artists or their publicists looking for support and exposure don't even listen to the station. This creates the impression that the station is only there to be used by the artist when they want something and it hardly encourages stations to be more supportive. For that reason, and for other obvious reasons, artists should strive to be as familiar as possible with all radio programmes. In many cases this can be achieved by actually listening to them and developing a good understanding of what they use and don't use. That in turn can often spark ideas for angles which might lead to increased coverage. If listening is not convenient or practical, radio station web sites or direct phone-calls should elicit the required information about targeted programmes.

Essential Programme Information

Ideally, each radio programme should be researched in order to find out what type of music it features and whether the format includes interviews, live performances, gossip, gig news, competitions or any other relevant sections that can be exploited by a new artist endeavouring to reach a wider audience. Familiarity with as many programmes as possible will not only give artists and their publicists a clearer picture of the opportunities available for new artists and the often subtle differences between each programme's music policy, but it may even prompt more creative ways of getting one's music onto stations that otherwise might be overlooked. A good example of this occurred on South East Radio when Eleanor McEvoy was promoting her latest album, which is called Yola after a dialect once popular in the area. One of their programmes invited an expert on that dialect to discuss the album and that gave added value, longer time and considerable local interest to their coverage of the album.

How Many Tracks?

There's little point in sending in a demo, even on CD, containing more than three or four tracks. People in radio stations are too busy to do much more than listen to a couple of tracks at most on each record they receive, so the best tracks should be at the beginning of the CD.

Track Length/Content/Publishing Details

The length of a particular track, whether on a single or album, may be a crucial factor in it generating airplay or being ignored. Tracks longer than about 3 minutes 30 seconds are likely to lose airtime opportunities, especially in the daytime. The tendency for some artists not to give any timings at all on their CD cover may, if they are an unknown artist, be a complete turn off to busy people in a station. So the general advice might be summed up as follows:

- Always give timings for all tracks
- Tracks for which you expect to get airplay need to be of an acceptable duration
- Put your best track/tracks first.

With an official album release, it can help if you flag those 2 to 4 tracks which you deem to be particularly suitable for a station to use. The lack of an intro may also militate against plays if it's a particular DJ's style to talk over the intro to the records he/she plays. Other factors likely to affect plays are the use of foul language, explicit sexual references, potential libel and statements in lyrics that may transgress the station's obligation to be impartial. It also helps if you ensure that the relevant publishing details can be easily found by the station logger, and that they are legible and unambiguous.

What Else To Send?

Ideally, each record submitted should be accompanied by a one-page biography and a contact name and number in case the station would like to do an interview or requires some additional information. Photos are not essential, although some radio people don't mind getting them as it can provide an additional impression of the artist and their professionalism. Sending long detailed letters is not advised, and attempts at humour may not work.

Sound Quality

Many stations report instances of artists submitting a recording accompanied by an apology for the poor sound quality for reasons of time or budgetary problems. Even if the station is sympathetic towards a musician's penurious plight, it is generally believed that the modern music public is now far too sophisticated to accept sub-standard material, no matter what the hard luck excuses might be.

Building Relationships

Musicians would be well advised to follow up efficiently when they make promises to send records, information or competition prizes, and to turn up well in time for interviews with some basic idea as to what they want to get across. Otherwise, as has happened already in several instances, they will find themselves unwelcome in stations at a point in their careers when they badly need the exposure. Similarly, poor radio performances may discourage those stations from being supportive of other new artists.

Station/Programme Deadlines

As more and more stations are tending to plan the content of their programmes well in advance, it is becoming increasingly important to ensure that information, requests for interviews, competition prizes and records get to them well ahead of their deadlines. While one would like to think that the best programmes have a built-in flexibility that allows for essential last-minute changes, the normal run of promotional requests should be made in plenty of time for the station to be able to make an informed decision.

Unfortunately it is apparently not uncommon for artists, their managers, local agents or their publicists to ring stations to inform them that the artist is "heading down your way tomorrow, any chance of an interview?" Such a casual approach is not only evidence of a lack of professionalism but it is likely to be futile, since a professionally run station will have filled all its vacant spots for such interviews perhaps as far back as the beginning of the previous week. While it is impossible to establish a general deadline policy to cover all programmes on all stations, professional music PR persons and local booking agents should be fully familiar with all relevant station and programme deadlines. If not, they should ask.

If in doubt, it would seem far better to put one's request in too early rather than risk being too late.

Interviews

New artists across all genres are increasingly tending to contact radio stations asking for interviews, often requesting space on programmes which have a policy of not doing interviews at all and sometimes when the act doesn't even have their first record or demo done. Station personnel themselves feel it would be more useful if those artists sought plays for their records or mentions of their tour or gig details rather than interviews for which they may be ill prepared.

Some stations see this development as more to do with the artist wanting to sound important by pontificating about their worldviews rather than a desire to expose their music. They also feel that new artists are rarely very good interview subjects anyway, because they often become inarticulate as soon as the red light goes on. By all means artists should seek interviews on programmes where there is a policy of using them, but the interview becomes counter-productive if the interviewee is insufficiently articulate to communicate information and views, or has little to say anyway.

Publicists and managers have a key advisory role to play here in ensuring that musicians are well briefed before each and every interview, as a bad interview is a lost opportunity that may not only lose fans but is unlikely to encourage a repeat invitation from the station. Smart artists usually make a short list of information they want to get across, but it's not unusual to hear artists being interviewed and forgetting to mention the new album or tomorrow night's gig.

Summary of Advice

- Become as familiar as possible with the content and policy of all radio programmes.
- Send records to the right person at the right address.
- Only send records to programmes known to use the type of music featured on the record, unless there's a very good reason to do otherwise.
- Include clearly legible contact name and numbers.
- Where possible give timings for all tracks.
- Keep airplay tracks to a playable length.
- Keep biographies and press releases to a single page where possible .
- Avoid making excuses for poor quality.
- Put the best track/tracks first.
- Make a polite follow-up call.
- Ensure information re gigs and tours is received before deadlines.
- If further information or materials are promised, make sure they are sent and received.
- Turn up in time for studio interviews.
- Ensure that correct publishing details can be clearly read on the record sleeve.
- Try to develop positive relationships rather than antagonising those whose support is sought.

NB. The key personnel in radio stations are subject to change on a regular basis. If Artists and those who work with them do not have up-to-date accurate information they should address copies of records/press releases to the Music Programmer at the appropriate stations.

Sources of additional information

Radio stations, their personnel, programmes and policies are subject to change at any time. However it is possible to keep in touch with the changing nature of Irish radio through a variety of sources. Nearly all Irish radio stations now have their own websites which give full programme listings plus details of key personnel.

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