

DEALING WITH THE CHRISTMAS 24/7 TACTIC

By Americalist Radio Division Manager Loyd Ford

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Life comes at you fast. A lot of AC stations around the country will soon be utilizing the Christmas 24/7 tactic this fall and making the hard decision about when to flip to all Christmas on a variety of dates, from mid-October to Thanksgiving Day. This powerful idea is now well known and in many places “feared” as the event that really signals the end of the fall book for those not airing holiday music.

In fact, Americalist Media Marketing originally developed our **FastCUME tactic** to serve only those stations playing Christmas 24/7 or for stations in a competitive Christmas image battle. Those are situations where faster CUME truly seems to be the key ingredient to owning “top-of-mind” and winning the ratings **boost** from this tactic.

Since the Christmas 24/7 tactic has become famous in Arbitron circles, some programmers have actually given up on the fall book after the in-market Christmas flips take place. They consider that they will “take their lumps” and forge ahead. However, there are a growing number of programmers willing to look at the strong Christmas 24/7 tactic and exploit its *weakness*. Remember, when plotting strategy, every tactic has an Achilles heel.

Other AC, Oldies and Country stations have found they can be hurt by the Christmas 24/7 tactic. This is because Country’s at-work base has expanded due to adjustments in its music and presentation, and AC depends on at-work to give their stations life at the radio revenue table. Country and Oldies stations also have a dynamic lyric-based connection with their audience that makes Christmas stations huge potential competitors depending on the market.

Some programmers are unwilling to just allow a competitive AC station to have a seasonal advantage late in the fall, and there is a good amount of discussion about how to proceed in limiting the success of such a strategy in the fall book.

WHEN BEING THE ALTERNATIVE CAN HAVE POSITIVE RATINGS IMPACT

In most cases stations strive to make their station everyone’s **first** choice in the market. This is true because high passion is what drives recall and actual listening the most. There is no substitute for a passionate “that’s my favorite.” However, the holidays can be an exception to this rule. The window of time during the holiday season allows you to be the first choice for your listeners **and** the *alternative* for those disenchanted with stations who ditched their format for the temporary high of Christmas 24/7.

If you are considering trying to harvest some of the juice out of being the alternative to the Christmas 24/7 tactic used by AC and a handful of other stations, you might consider looking at the strengths and the weaknesses of the strategy for those stations.

We all know the strengths. What are the weaknesses?

1. These stations make themselves vulnerable to attack by abandoning their regular format.
2. They play nothing but Christmas music all the time. All the time. All the time. All the time.
3. Stations with large at-work listening audiences can tend to “bore” their audience if PDs don’t vary their holiday music rotations (not that song, again!) or choose Christmas selections which

- don't rank high in your actual market (there can be wide differences).
4. Stations that "flip formats" always disregard an undetermined number of people who don't like the new format. (Some station loyalists may feel that if they have to listen to nothing but Christmas music 24/7 while they work, they might actually go insane.)

Even for people who love Christmas music, too much of a good thing can be...bad.

While broadcasters have come to learn the significant increases Christmas 24/7 can bring in CUME and time spent listening, they have also pressed the flip date earlier and earlier to take full advantage of the tactic's benefits. *Listeners are noticing* and "flinching" at some of that "forced programming" on these stations. Until now, no one has tried to take full advantage of being the alternative. *Until now*.

So, the opportunity to help yourself to some of the audience of one of these "holiday format flip" stations does exist in the people who will "fall away" during the use of this tactic because their favorite choice of radio station has basically left the dial. This is even more true when two or three stations are playing nothing but Christmas music. The fatigue factor can be quite real, and it can make large numbers of listeners choose something else. YOU want to be the **something else** they choose. And you want to make sure **you** get the credit for it.

TAKING THE "LISTENERS' SIDE"

Do you remember the critical advantage you often get building a new radio station by "taking the listeners' side"? It still works. Take the listeners' side with holiday tunes and timing. Smart programmers must decide if they can effectively make an effort on air and off to let listeners know *there is an alternative for them*. You can be the radio station emphasizing that listeners can rely on you for great music – including *some* Christmas songs mixed in as the holiday approaches, without wearing them out with too much Jingle Bell Rock.

While the message of being a common sense alternative for these unhappy listeners should be on your loyal listener e-mail, you really want impact outside of your normal CUME. After all, those people are supposed to love you already. You'll want to seek any opportunity to drive audience to your station because from these holiday music stations. You "have taken their side" and taken a "common sense" approach to Christmas and holiday music. **The most important part of this alternative strategy is to *make sure enough people know and "get" what you are doing.***

THE UNANTICIPATED GOAL

This is a surprise attack that the "Holiday Music Station" will not expect and is not likely to take very seriously. Once they commit, they also cannot really turn back and blunt your alternative strategy because of the full commitment they have to Christmas 24/7. That leaves them open to *the weakness of their strategy*. The goal for you is to then become everyone's **alternative** to the station or stations playing only Christmas music. **After all, your P1s already love you for being what you are all the time.** By employing a tactic to become the market's alternative, you have opened up the opportunity with a large volume of **potential new listeners** to thicken up your fall *from the flip until the end of the fall book*. Keep in mind that these stations will be "out of their normal format for weeks on end. That is enough time for a new listening habit to develop. You can be that new habit and benefit in Winter '08 and Spring '08 and beyond.

THE GOAL IS NOT TO DIS SANTA OR CHRISTMAS

Of course you do not want to position yourself as *anti*-Christmas and eliminate Christmas music from being played on your station. Remember, you are only taking the *common sense* “*side of the listeners.*” The fall book ends this year on December 12, not December 25.

TURNING THE TABLES ON THE COMPETITION

Turning the Christmas 24/7 tactic around on these stations is an unusual idea. It's just not as unusual as giving up. This should not be your main attack for fall '07, but you should apply your strategic mind to every single thing that can bring positive results for you in the fall book. After all, your numbers will play a key role in your 2008 revenues.

If you want to talk about how this alternative strategy can come into play after your main marketing attack this fall, you can seek me out for additional thoughts on positioning your station as the alternative. Or if someone in your cluster wants to check out the **FastCUME Tactic** and how it can be used with your programming to actually blunt holiday music stations, reach me at 877-475-6864.

Good luck with your fall book. Progressive strategists always find a way to give themselves an extra advantage or limit their competitors from growing out of control. The Christmas 24/7 tactic is no different. It has been around for a while. You know that real people (listeners) in your market roll their eyes because they know the AC stations are going to actually flip format early *and leave town to become the big Santa station*. If you take advantage of this by taking the listeners' side, it could mean a much bigger fall for your station. And that will mean a very merry Christmas, indeed.

Loyd Ford is the radio division manager for Americalist Media Marketing. Loyd programmed radio stations in small, medium and large markets around the country for a variety of smart broadcast companies including Capstar, SFX Broadcasting, Entercom and Citadel and has been involved in a number of very intense programming battles in country and adult contemporary formats. Americalist provides strategic direct marketing solutions to help stations achieve bigger ratings and has been generating higher ratings for radio in all market sizes and formats since 1987. You can sign up for the free monthly promotions and marketing e-newsletter Jump! On the Americalist site : www.boostmyratings.com.