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Hook, Line & Singer!
Essential criteria for maximising the playlist potential
of New Zealand music on commercial radio:
A Programme Directors' perspective

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'Station and programme directors act as gatekeepers, being responsible for ensuring a prescribed and identifiable sound or format, based on what the management of the station believes will generate the largest audience – and ratings – and consequent advertising revenue. The...programme director...will regularly sift through new releases, selecting three or four to add to the playlist. The criteria underpinning this process will normally be a combination of the reputation of the artist; a record's previous performance, if already released overseas; whether the song fits the station's format; and, at times, the gut intuition of those making the decision. In the case of the first of these factors, reputation and previous track record, publicity material from the label/artist/distributor plays an important role, jogging memories or sparking interest in a previously unknown artist' (Shuker, 1998, p. 242).

Abstract

For years the commercial radio industry in New Zealand has fought against regulation of local music on the airwaves, citing that in the competitive radio environment (a product of governmental deregulation of the industry) it would be detrimental to both their business and the present levels of local content being achieved voluntarily by radio. It is this same competition that forces commercial radio Programme Directors (PDs) to be ruthless with the music selected for their playlists. With up to 40 new releases a week and only a limited number of spaces available, every track is carefully scrutinised. Justification of decisions are made by the consideration of various selection criteria identified in this study, such as the overseas performance of a track, an artist's profile in the media, and the amount of promotional support they are receiving. Often, these qualities can supersede the sound of the song itself. 'Quality marketing is (arguably) more important than quality music. Not a palatable situation to many music people, I know, but a nasty reality and understandable when you consider the CD clutter that radio is faced with' (Smyth, pers.comm., 27 January 2000).

This situation does not bode well for local musicians, many of whom come to radio without qualities such as a previous radio track record. Additionally, the number of local releases presented to radio is significantly less than the number of overseas releases, yet in order to be considered for playlist selection PDs state that local music must be judged alongside its international counterparts - in other words, by the same selection criteria. PDs do concede, however, that a local music track will be given preference over an international track of equal quality, but only if it satisfies all other selection criteria. While there is evidence to suggest that this decision is political (and

perhaps being used to stem the tide of proposed music regulation), the identification of selection criteria presented in this study, combined with a PD preference for New Zealand music, could give local musicians a chance to secure a spot on the commercial radio playlist that may otherwise be difficult to obtain.

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Music Industry Abbreviations & Descriptors

ABA	Australian Broadcasting Authority	<i>Australian federal government regulator of radio and television</i>
AMCOS	Australasian Mechanical Copyright Owners Association	<i>Represents the interests of music publishers and their writers in Australasia</i>
APRA	Australasian Performing Rights Association	<i>An organisation who collect and distribute royalties on behalf of songwriters in Australasia</i>
KMAG	Kiwi Music Action Group	<i>A group made up of representatives from the commercial radio and recording industries to promote New Zealand music</i>
NZ On Air	New Zealand On Air	<i>Government organisation who use public funding to promote social and cultural values in broadcasting</i>
RBA	Radio Broadcasters Association	<i>An organisation representing the interests of the commercial radio industry</i>
RIANZ	Recording Industry Association of New Zealand	<i>Trade organisation representing record companies in New Zealand</i>
TRB	The Radio Bureau	<i>Represents the national advertising and promotional interests of radio</i>

Contents

	Abstract	i
	Acknowledgements	iii
	Music Industry Abbreviations & Descriptors	iv
1	Introduction	1
	The Importance of Radio Airplay	1
	The Radio Business in New Zealand	2
	Promoting Local Music: The Quota Debate & NZ On Air	7
	Playlist Decisions: The Role of the PD in the Decision-Making Process	8
	The Influence of Supporting Data on Playlist Decisions	11
	Playlist Potential: A Look at 'Song Quality'	14
	The Importance of Record Company Promotion & Artist Profile	17
	The Impact of Other Mediums on Local Music Airplay	19
	Summary	20
2	Method	22
	Step 1: Background Interviews	22
	Step 2: Identification of Music Selection Criteria	22
	Step 3: Questionnaire Design & Implementation	23
	Step 4: Results Analysis	25
3	Results & Discussion	28
	Introduction	28
	Radio Station Criteria	31
	Artist/Song Criteria	39
	NZ On Air Criteria	52
	Track Performance Criteria	61
	Other Media Criteria	70
	Local Music Findings	79
4	Conclusion	83
	Appendices	90
	i Format Descriptors	91
	ii Local Content Levels on Commercial Radio in Australia	92
	Iii PD Questionnaire	93
	Interviews	100
	Personal Communications	101
	Bibliography	103

Figures

1	Overall Category Analysis	30
2	Playlist Decision Makers	38
3	PD Preference For NZ Music	80

Tables

1	Local Content Levels on Commercial Radio in NZ by Format Type	4
2	Industry Related Background Interviews	22
3	PD Questionnaire Design Interviews	23
4	PD Questionnaires	25
5	Process for Criteria Averaging	26
6	Overall Category Analysis	26
7	Overall Criteria Results	28
8	Radio Station Criteria	31
9	Artist/Song Criteria	39
10	NZ On Air Criteria	52
11	Track Performance Criteria	61
12	Other Media Criteria	70