

Radio Ink's Best Programmers Gaze Into Their HD Crystal Balls

While radio programmers are grappling with issues that stretch from locating great talent to grabbing listeners' attention in an increasingly cluttered media landscape, the emergence of HD Radio provides them with a new means to attract listeners. Elsewhere in this issue you'll find perspectives from the top 50 programmers in radio on the challenges they and the industry face from a programming standpoint; here they share some candid predictions for the future of the HD Radio market, and offer some surprising opinions on the viability of this burgeoning service.

RADIO INK: What is your prediction for HD Radio?

Courtney Nelson, KLAQ, El Paso, TX: Radio is excited, ready, and tired of other media getting all the attention — but it has to happen now. The radios, a lot of them, have to be out now. Three more generations of iPods could come and go by the time HD is ready for the masses.

Gregg Swedberg, KEEY, Minneapolis: If we get it going, it will be great. I have one in my car. The audio is better; and with the nine new stations we added here in Minneapolis, my recreational listening has changed.

Curt Hansen, WEBE, Bridgeport, CT: HD Radio will be huge, but only if we programmers step up to the challenge of creating different, outstanding, and compelling programming. A wider choice in programming has allowed satellite to get a toehold.

Doug Montgomery, WBCT, Grand Rapids, MI: HD Radio, with its increased programming choices for the cost of a new receiver, may bring some satellite radio people back to the terrestrial radio fold.

Jon Prell, WKDQ, Evansville, IN: The issue with HD is not so much whether it will be successful, but rather, will it happen on a universal scale and, if so, when? Right now, HD is available on such a limited basis that it's almost impossible to predict its future.

Eric Powers, KUBE, Seattle: HD is a big step in the right direction and could have a huge upside when it's readily available with all automakers.

Jeff Sisk, WHOP, Clarksville, TN: Until more receivers are available, I don't think HD will make that big an impact in the small markets.

Jack Swanson, KGO, San Francisco: I don't see a bright future for HD, but I have to applaud our industry for finally looking further than next quarter's sales figures and investing in our long-term future.

Phil Boyce, WABC, New York: We have to embrace the technology and hope that it sticks. Anything that can make WABC sound as crisp and clear as an FM music station, I am all for. Someday I hope to get WABC on one of our FM side channels, to allow me to use this new technology to penetrate the brick and steel of the Manhattan skyscrapers where millions of listeners now have a hard time picking up the AM band.

TJ Holland, Cumulus, Cincinnati: Until the automakers start

equipping new vehicles with HD, we are spinning our wheels. Trials won't happen until it's free to hear. We still haven't provided a valid reason for the average person, who hasn't upgraded in radio technology since FM, to buy a new piece of hardware.

Kerry Wolfe, Clear Channel, Milwaukee: I liken it to HDTV. Once you try it, you're hooked for life. Watching the NFL in HD the past few weeks has me wondering how I ever watched a game without it. There's no going back for me. It's up to us to create the compelling content to drive listening to our HD2 channels.

Jimmy Steal, KPRW, Emmis, Los Angeles: HD is a step in the right direction, fostering new formats and personalities and digital sound. When newer iterations of the HD receivers come out — where HD2 signals can be tuned to directly without having to go through the home frequency — greater penetration and acceptance will have the potential for significant increases.

Bill Conway, KOIT, San Francisco: The jury is still out on HD. That jury is the audience. Awareness of HD has increased, but it isn't clear that it requires a special radio. Millennials like the concept, especially the "free" aspect, when it's explained to them in focus groups. The HD Alliance spots for fourth quarter include seven manufacturers or retailers with HD product, which is a big increase from six months ago. At NAB, a speaker from the UK said that 54 percent of radios now sold in England are digital and that Dixons, a huge retailer, is discontinuing sale of analog radios in January. The dynamics in the UK are different than in the U.S., but this is an impressive stat.

RI: Will listeners care about improved sound quality?

Cat Collins, KQKS, Denver: On AM music stations, yes.

Conway: Quality of signal will be a factor. FM replaced AM for music, because it offered better quality. CDs replaced cassettes because of quality, though people had to replace personal libraries. When iPods offered better sound than Walkmans, people bought them, and again replaced personal libraries. But we should remember that the HD2 channels reduce the digital quality of the primary signal. It is still better than FM, but not as good as the full 96kb quality.

Hansen: On HD, once the programming is built, the listeners will come. Improved sound quality is a plus, yet the programming, side channels, and other digital capabilities of HD Radio are what will make it exciting for listeners.

Kipper McGee, WLS, Chicago: Our biggest challenge is communicating the value proposition to consumers, then delivering on that promise. It all starts with something compelling going into listeners' eardrums, every minute of every day, whatever the distribution platform.

Mark Callaghan, KUAD/KTRR, Windsor, CO: Listeners will absolutely care about the improved sound quality — once it is demonstrated to them.