

Christian Radio: Not Just a “Niche Format” Anymore

By Brad Kelly
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These are great times for Religious radio formats. Once considered to have only niche appeal, Religious-formatted stations are quickly gaining mainstream audience acceptance. Since 1998, average quarter-hour listening for Religious-formatted stations has grown by 35 percent, according to Arbitron

research. This growth rate tops increases seen by every other format measured by Arbitron.

Christian Music Hits the Demographic Bull’s-Eye

The well-targeted demographic appeal of Christian stations is quite remarkable—and rivals mainstream secular stations. Here’s a compelling piece of information: 71% of the Contemporary Christian audience is in the all-important 25-54 media-buying demographic. That means Contemporary Christian stations are generally richer in 25-54 listeners than secular Adult Contemporary, CHR, Country, News/Talk and Oldies stations.

It’s All About the Music

Much of the Religious format’s phenomenal growth has been driven by two music-based formats: Gospel and Contemporary Christian. Thanks to a surge in both the popularity of Gospel and the number of stations that identify themselves as Gospel, the genre has posted a 33 percent growth in listening over the last 5 years.

The success of Contemporary Christian music stations—which cover artists like Michael W. Smith, Steven Curtis Chapman and Jars of Clay—

is even more extraordinary. Listening levels have increased more than threefold over the last 15 Arbitron quarterly rating periods.

Currently, many Christian music stations earn Arbitron shares rivaling those of their secular competitors, including WDJC-FM in Birmingham, AL; WJLS-AM in Beckley, WV; WCTL-FM in Erie, PA; and KXOJ-FM in Tulsa, OK. In addition, several major market Christian music stations draw cume audiences well in excess of 200,000, including KLTY-FM in Dallas, TX; WFSH-FM in Atlanta, GA; WZFS-FM in Chicago, IL and KFSH-FM in Los Angeles, CA, just to name a few. Though Religious-formatted stations have long been stigmatized by format bias, the numbers are undeniable and speak for themselves. Ratings-conscious advertisers and ad agencies are now being forced to seriously consider these stations as part of their media mix.

Mainstream Marketing and Programming Techniques Translate Well

A key part of the success at many Religious-formatted stations is using the programming and promotion techniques of mainstream stations. In an interview with Radio & Records Christian editor Rick Welke, Dan Baughman, general manager of WCVO-FM in Columbus, OH, discussed his station’s successful conversion from Christian Talk to Contemporary Christian.

Baughman has positioned the station’s new identity as “family-friendly.” To promote and support this new positioning, he hired a promotions director and developed relationships with local organizations and sports teams. The strategy has helped WCVO build a cume audience that is double the amount it had before the changes.

Salem Communications' WFHM-FM in Cleveland, OH is another Contemporary Christian radio success story. When the station originally went on the air, its playlist consisted largely of older songs. Since then, veteran program director Sue Wilson has changed the station's emphasis to current music and expanded its marketing efforts. The changes have improved the station's Time Spent Listening numbers and made WFHM a viable competitor in Cleveland—so much so, in fact, that WFHM's female demographics are in the top 10 for all Cleveland stations.

Arbitron salutes the growth and continued success of the NRB and religious broadcasters nationwide. If you'd like to learn more about the ratings successes of Religious-formatted stations, check out the "American Radio Listening Trends" report at www.arbitron.com/radio_stations/arlt.htm. The free report is an incredible resource for detailed information on the demographic makeup of all Arbitron-rated radio formats, including Contemporary Christian, Gospel, Religious and Southern Gospel. You can even run a comparison of different formats to see how their audiences stack up.

In addition to the American Radio Listening Trends report, you can find numerous helpful Arbitron studies on radio listening at the Arbitron Web site—they're all free and they're available exclusively at www.ArbitronRadio.com.

About Brad Kelly

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About Arbitron

Arbitron Inc. (NYSE: ARB) is an international media and marketing research firm serving radio broadcasters, cable companies, advertisers, advertising agencies and outdoor advertising companies in the United States, Mexico and Europe.

Arbitron's core businesses are measuring network and local market radio audiences across the United States; surveying the retail, media and product patterns of local market consumers; and providing application software used for analyzing media audience and marketing information data. Arbitron Webcast Services measures the audiences of audio and video content on the Internet, commonly known as webcasts.

The Company is developing the Portable People Meter, a new technology for radio, TV and cable ratings. Through its Scarborough Research joint venture with VNU Media Measurement & Information, Arbitron also provides media and marketing research services to the broadcast television, magazine, newspaper, outdoor and online industries.



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