

## THE SIX ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS: SIX YEARS LATER

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Several years ago I prepared a series of articles that analyzed the most common characteristics of successful radio stations. Those articles, published here on All Access, parsed the elements into six categories that, when taken together, provided a comprehensive analytical framework for discussing the development and execution of successful radio programming.

In the six years since the creation of the “Six Essential Elements of a Successful Radio Station” model the industry has changed dramatically. Technological innovation, including the widespread proliferation of online radio, satellite radio, and high definition digital radio, and audio programming services through cell phones and other “nontraditional” means has driven continued fragmentation in radio formats. Today we have the opportunity to reach much more specifically defined audiences

The way we think about what we do has changed slightly as well: while before we talked of creating “good radio,” today our emphasis has shifted to creating “good content,” as we focus more on the message and less on the medium through which it is distributed. But despite the seemingly cataclysmic changes, a review of the six essential elements reveals that the fundamental concepts remain true today, albeit with a few updates and modifications.

**Consistency and Continuity** remains a hallmark of successful audio programming, whether its principal delivery mechanism is radio or some other means of content distribution. If anything, this element has become even more critical than it once was, since today’s programming is more than merely content, but complete brand identities which must be applied consistently across multiple platforms and across time.

**Audience Affinity** replaces the old “Audience Research and Communication” element, broadened to reflect modern trends in the way audiences connect with content providers. While request lines, live remotes, and ratings were once the only way to take the pulse of our audiences, today’s social networking web sites (MySpace, Friendster, etc.), Instant Messenger programs (AIM, Yahoo! Messenger, etc.), e-mail, and other communication technologies have changed the broadcaster-listener dynamic which now requires content providers to maintain a more active and contemporaneous connection to their target audiences.

**Identity**, much like Consistency and Continuity, takes on a somewhat elevated position in the new world of radio, since fragmentation has given rise to an abundance of new niche-focused formats. Listeners that once had a choice of 30 or so signals from their

local market can now choose from hundreds of broadcast, satellite, and online programming sources, many of which can be similar yet each quite unique. As a result, content producers must define their brands with ever increasing precision and craft identities that connect more directly with the target audience in order to maintain a competitive advantage.

**Localism**, became a buzzword in the mid-90s maelstrom of deregulation, remains a cornerstone of the radio industry, but as the sources of programming have changed, listeners' interpretation of what is "local" has become more on abstract notions of community rather than mere physical geographic presence.

Internet radio stations, for example, are "local" in the sense that its listeners are all part of the same online neighborhood, notwithstanding the fact that they are physically miles apart from one another. To be sure, the notion of conventional local radio remains alive and well, but programmers of terrestrial radio must be cognizant of localism's increasing fluidity and their role within the larger content context.

Formerly "Profitability," the element of **Fiscal Management** has been expanded to recognize that successful content providers are adept at both revenue generation and cost management. This element is concerned not just with the bottom line, but also the art and science of revenue management, and speaks to the importance of financial and operational innovation.

The rise of voice tracking, once rejected by many as being against the industry's core values is now viewed as a cost-effective mechanism by which to provide audiences with high-quality programming in a way that is economically rational for key stakeholders and is but one example of operational innovation.

On the revenue side, innovation in radio's traditional business model has led to the development of new revenue streams for broadcasters through content repurposing and other ancillary operations. Even within radio's tried and true advertiser-supported business model, innovation has led to ideas such as Clear Channel's "Less is More" initiative and other methods of enhancing the value of the broadcasters' airtime and the advertisers' return on investment.

Perhaps the most sweeping changes come in the **Community Standards & Practices** element which was originally known as "Legality and Ethicality." When the original Six Essential Elements was designed indecency regulation was at least relatively, albeit wildly imperfect, but today the FCC is blatantly inconsistent in its enforcement of the prohibitions on indecency, leaving conventional terrestrial broadcasters with literal uncertainty as to what content may give rise to indecency liability. Still, compliance with legal and social norms remains a cornerstone of successful radio, as broadcasters can remain cognizant of local community standards and exercise reasonable care when preparing programming, instructing airstaff, and generally operating the station.

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Indeed, much has changed since the initial Six Essential Elements framework came to fruition six years ago. Continued consolidation and technological advancement have led to vast changes in the way broadcasters develop and disseminate content, but with a few changes – largely changes in form as opposed to substance – the framework continues to provide an effective mechanism to analyze station performance and identify strengths and weaknesses of a particular operation in the never-ending quest to achieve and maintain competitive advantage.

