



OPINION AND INSIGHT

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How Can the UK Step Up Its Radio Advertising Game?

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GCRS' Nicola Gilbert shines light on the recent D&AD and RAB event 'I Wish I Had Done That'



It will come as news to none of us in the creative industry that radio is seen as the poor relation to TV, and, in fact, all other advertising mediums. Generally speaking, it doesn't receive as much love, and creatives just don't get as excited by a radio brief as they should do.

However, in my view, this is a massively missed opportunity. The possibilities of radio writing are limitless, and it can be very rewarding to write and direct a radio commercial if you are inspired enough to do so. This is why I was very interested

to attend the recent D&AD 'Pioneering Audio' event, in partnership with RAB and hosted at Grey London.

Speakers on the night included a number of the UK industry's leading audio gurus. Award winning radio writer Paul Burke, senior producer and Blaxland Productions MD Simon Blaxland, sound designer and Angell Sounds MD Nick Angell were joined by Grey's well respected CD Andy Lockley and chair John Sayers, to discuss their favourite ear candy, under the theme heading 'I Wish I'd Done That'.

As you might expect there were as many questions raised as answered on the night, such as 'Why is it that the US industry consistently does radio advertising so much better than us?' and 'Does the recent success of long-form podcast record-smasher Serial hold any lessons for the commercial world?'

When it came down to it, the same arguments that have always surrounded radio still rang true. Without a good script you aren't going to create a good commercial. It's all in the writing, allowing for space, SFX and voice delivery.

As John Sayers said: "Radio is the theatre of the mind. You can go anywhere. You can have any cast, any location, any props, any costumes you want and you just plant them in people's minds, using words and sound effects. So it's a very cost effective medium and you can be experimental with it."

However, that's not to say you have to take your audience to the moon and back for no reason. Many of the pieces of audio chosen by the speakers demonstrated how the simplest ideas are often the most powerful on radio.

A commercial that was chosen on the night - that I'm proud to say GCRS founder and sound designer Raja Sehgal helped to create - was the Nike: Write the Future spot, reminding us all of the power of complex and well-crafted sound design.

Going back to the Serial example, Nick Angell questioned whether it is possible to serialise a radio commercial, for instance, and Simon Blaxland also chose some long form radio programming. The Listening Project on Radio 4 is a project inviting people to share intimate conversations with a loved one or friend. Simon played a segment from 'Carly – Talking to My Stillborn Son', which effectively demonstrated how powerful a single voice and a strong monologue can be.

Simon Blaxland described it thus, "A brilliant audio piece is something that captivates you, stays with you, something you can hear again and again and again, and, even when you know that the punch line is, it's still good."

Interestingly, three of the four panellists chose examples from the US. Brilliantly written and produced ads, they each brought to life the way that creatives Stateside really do know how to produce the best radio commercials.

In the words of Paul Burke, discussing his choice, a Chevys restaurant radio spot, "I always think, if it's a little, mini piece of comedy or drama - as good radio commercials should be - it should answer the questions, 'Who are these people?', 'Where are they?', 'What are they doing?', 'How do we know?' And this commercial answers them all brilliantly. There are a hundred and one product points and, somehow, just through brilliant writing and characterisation, they weave them in to stunning effect. I wish I'd done that."

Perhaps the key to upping our game in the UK, where radio advertising is concerned, lies with seeking inspiration from unusual quarters. Andy Lockley brought along a diverse range of different audio examples that Grey creatives have been thinking about lately, such as the Céleste Boursier-Mougenot installation featuring 70 zebra finches randomly landing on, and 'playing', electric guitars. His message? That rhythm and sounds - metallic bike noises, choruses of crickets - taken in any context, can spark ideas.

The evening was also an opportunity to look back at the radio commercials that have truly stood the test of time. I had forgotten about Kodakcolour Gold: Colours, starring Jimmy Nail, from the 80's. It's a long, bold and brilliant radio spot, which, as Blaxland pointed out, won awards whilst also achieving the client's objective of increasing sales. We're very proud to point out that our very own Carole Humphrey produced this too!

At the heart of discussions was the message, shared by everyone on stage: You just need a good idea, a well-written script and excellent production values.
