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**Radio formats**

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### Notes to broadcaster

Farmer radio programs use many different formats. This info doc gives youa list of useful formats to consider for your program. It gives a brief description of each format, as well as suggestions on what kind of information the format is best suited to communicate, or how the format encourages audience engagement.

**Introduction**

In many stations, the regular (that is, daily or weekly) farmer program is a "magazine," or multi-format program. The magazine structure allows producers the freedom to use the most effective format for each element in the overall program. Because of its diversity of sounds and approaches, a multi-format program is interesting to listen to.

But *which format* should you use for *which element* of your program?

It is one thing to identify *content* you want in your farmer program. But the question of *how you turn that content into radio* is as important as the content itself!

There are dozens of formats for presenting content on-air. Some are simple, economical and effective. Some are effective but costly to produce.

You could, for example, provide all of your program content in a scripted multi-character drama. But that would require an exceptional team of writers and actors – a luxury not available for most farmer programs!

Or you could have the host read all the content. But that would surely bore rather than engage your listeners. They would not hear people like themselves on the radio, and they would not consider your program as *their* program.

Some program elements require a *specific format.* For example, *market prices* should always be read out by the host (or another on-air personality), using a prepared script that follows a regular sequence and is always broadcast at the same time of day. Market prices need to be accurate; hence the need for a script. And market prices change daily or weekly. Hence the need for clear and concise presentation. Almost all of your listeners will already be motivated to listen to a market price program. So you don't have to "dress up" market information to make it interesting.

However, you can try out a *range of formats* for other program elements. For example, if the program element is about a "deep-rooted issue," you can choose to treat it with one of many formats, including an interview, panel discussion, phone-in, expert interview, tape-talk – or a mixture of more than one format. (A “deep-rooted issue” is an issue that stands in the way of productive farming and is not easily solved.)

**Formats appropriate for a magazine program**

The following formats have been selected for three reasons:

* they can be effective if used properly
* they are relatively simple to produce
* they don't require a lot of resources

The more common formats are mentioned first, with the relatively lesser-used formats listed nearer the end.

**Interview:** The interview is the backbone of many farmer programs. This format usually involves the host asking questions of someone in order to prompt that person to provide useful information or comments. Interviews can be conducted in the studio, in the field, or over the phone (phone-out). They can be live or pre-recorded. They can involve tough questions (for example, when holding an official to account), or they can be fully supportive (for example, when encouraging a farmer with no radio experience to express her opinions).

The interview is a great format because:

* it allows listeners to overhear someone else's conversation (we are all curious).
* the back-and-forth of the interview breaks up long sections of talk.
* it provides the host with a way to keep the discussion on-topic.

Studio interviews are easy to produce and are good at getting:

* facts from an expert, including anecdotes and perhaps some emotion. Interviewing an expert can be dry, however, so it’s important to engage the expert on a personal basis, Draw out anecdotes, uncover the expert’s personal relationship with the subject matter, and keep the factual information to a manageable level. If the interview leans too heavily towards the factual, the audience may not engage as eavesdroppers on the conversation, as there may be no emotional connection with either the guest or the host.
* personal interviews with someone who reveals something about themselves or tells a good story. This generally engages the audience more easily and successfully, as there are emotional touchstones, values and feelings we share as humans.

Broadcasters should prepare for an interview by having a good yet flexible idea of what they want to focus on in the interview. From prior research, you should have a rough outline of the story, good idea of the questions you want to ask, and a good idea what perspective or angle you think will be interesting to your listeners.

Field interviews are also fairly easy to produce, assuming the station has the resources to send staff to the field. Including field sounds adds a visual element to the information being transmitted. The audience still eavesdropping, but now listeners can visualize the scene. Experts can conduct demonstrations, using clear and descriptive language and natural sounds to help the audience clearly visualize and understand the information. Field interviews with natural sounds can connect the audience more strongly to the story being told, the emotions being expressed. For example, a field interview with a farmer who is waiting for a veterinarian to look at the family cow would be more dramatic and emotionally richer than a studio-based interviewed conducted after the visit with the vet.

Hosts can also interview two or more people *at the same time.* Or a host can interview one person *and then* another (and perhaps another). Hosts can also introduce a guest (and the topic of the interview) by playing a recording or “clip” of the guest talking about the subject.

**Phone-in/text-in shows:** The host invites listeners to phone the station and express their views on a specific topic while the program is on the air. These formats are cheap and easy-to-produce and allow the audience to be part of the program, to direct the conversation and to ask questions.

Phone-ins and text-ins are effective at engaging listeners. They work best when the host frames the topic in the form of *a question that callers or texters are asked to comment on*. When an expert guest takes questions, this format can be a useful way to transmit facts, as those facts will be based on real-life situations.

**Host chat:** Listeners want to have a positive, personal relationship with the program host, and the host can do a lot to encourage that. An effective host creates and builds this friendly relationship by reaching out and sharing his or her concerns and joys and respecting listeners as equals. The host chat usually appears at the beginning and the end of the program, but it can happen at any useful time.

**Panel discussion:** Panels are different from one-on-one interviews because the audience hears a variety of perspectives on a particular issue. This diversity of perspectives can stimulate a fuller, more intensive and compelling discussion. In a panel of women farmers, for example, the women may gather strength from each other’s words and engage in a broader and deeper discussion.

Like other studio interviews, panel discussions are quick and effective ways to cover a fair bit of ground. But they can end up being a series of one-on-one interviews unless the panellists have different perspectives or a specific point of disagreement. An effective panel is as much a discussion among participants as an interview. The interviewer is more moderator than questioner. Lively conversation is more interesting to listen to, and can more effectively convey information than a straight one-on-one factual interview.

**Message songs:** Radio is a perfect medium for songs. Songs can:

* add diversity to your program by introducing another kind of sound (beyond simple voice)
* reflect and affirm listeners’ culture
* stimulate an emotional response to a topic
* help listeners remember complex information

Some farmer programs create or use a locally-recorded song as part of the program’s introduction. In other cases, producers use an existing song with a message that fits with a program topic. Just be careful that the song does not distract listeners from the overall message you are trying to convey!

**Mini-drama:** Radio captures and stimulates the listener’s imagination. Thus, it is a perfect medium for drama. Drama can be as simple as recording a telephone conversation in which two of your staff are voice actors. Or it can be as complex as airing a dramatic item produced with professional researchers, writers and actors.

Radio dramas tell a story, either fictional or based on real-life events, which can educate and motivate listeners about important issues while entertaining. Dramas can also be designed primarily to stimulate the listening audience to participate in public discussion.

Full-length dramas are time-consuming and costly, and often require skilled writers and actors. Serial dramas generally require donors. The cost of good quality scripts, professional actors, and top quality technical expertise is considerable. However, shorter, “one-off” mini-dramas with 2-5 characters are more affordable and widely used. Mini-dramas can also involve a short series of connected episodes.

Radio dramas depend largely on *dialogue* to drive the dramatic action. Because the listening audience can only *hear* and not *see* what a radio character does, it is dialogue that must make a character’s behaviour and actions clear.

**Vox pop (or village voices):** A vox pop involves a broadcaster going to where the people (the "pop") are, and gathering brief opinions (“vox” means “voice) on a prearranged topic or question. These short opinions are then edited together. Vox pops are a good way to set up an interview. They show the person being interviewed that there is a range of public opinion that she needs to address. A vox pop will likely stimulate the interviewee to provide fuller and more revealing replies.

By airing voices from the street, a vox pop also grants listeners a sense of “ownership.” of the radio program. It validates peoples' opinions, and yes, most people like to hear their voice on the radio.

It sounds simple enough to record voices of passers-by, but there's more to vox popping than meets the ear:

* The vox pop should be clearly recorded on location but not drowned out by passing vehicles or blaring music. Look for a location with steady background noise and no sudden surges of loud traffic or music.
* The best vox pops are quick-paced, quirky, and memorable.
* The reporter's voice does not normally appear in a vox pop, except perhaps to ask an additional question or reiterate the original question.
* The subject of the vox pop should be something that people have a definite opinion about – often an item that’s in the news. Avoid vague subjects like the future of the world.
* Ask a simple, open-ended question that will be quickly understood and will not result in a series of yes/no responses.

**Scripted list:** Sometimes you need to provide detailed, accurate information. In this case, having a presenter read a scripted list makes the most sense. As mentioned above, market prices are well suited to a scripted list. Also, if your program discusses a farming practice that involves a series of steps, it’s a good idea to provide a scripted list of those steps at the end of the discussion. This will help farmers remember the important information. A short scripted list can also be made into a spot announcement that can be rebroadcast in future programs or during announcement breaks.

**Poems, quizzes and other competitions** (usually with modest prizes)**:** These can help listeners remember specific information. And they can be fun too! Farmers remember information when they *participate*, for example by creating and submitting a poem, song or other creative piece on a specific farming topic. If the best submissions are broadcast, this further helps farmers to remember. Another way to help listeners remember information is to encourage them to call in and recite the key points covered in an interview.

**Scripted discussion/interview:** Organizations such as Farm Radio International provide radio scripts on topics that can be useful for your farmers. By conducting some local research, you can adapt these scripts to cover issues of local importance, although there may be times when simply reading through a script on air with minimal changes is appropriate.

Some scripts take the form of ***two radio hosts discussing a topic***. The hosts are not experts on the topic, but speak as well-informed non-experts. Between the two of them, they introduce and provide a general overview of the topic. It’s a good idea for the hosts to play different roles or have different on-air personalities. For example, one host could ask questions (acting on the listeners’ behalf), and the other could answer the questions. One host could provide information, and the other host provide entertainment. Having two different roles or “personalities” creates a dynamic that keeps the audience engaged. This format requires some background research on the topic – just enough to decide which information should be included in a general overview.

Other radio scripts (from Farm Radio International and other organizations) take the form of a ***scripted host-expert interview***.This format presents a host talking with a person who has special expertise on a topic. To adapt this scripted format for broadcast, find another person at your station who can play the role of the expert – another broadcaster, or perhaps the extension agent who works with your station. With this second person, practice reading the script as you translate and adapt it to the farmers’ language. Read it through again and again until you are confident that it sounds “unscripted” and spontaneous – and interesting! And remember: don’t try to fool your listeners. If the script involves a host and a lawyer, but you don’t have a lawyer, make it clear to your listeners that the original interview was conducted with a lawyer, and that, because the issue is so important to farmers, you are “re-creating” the interview by having someone else speak the lawyer’s words.

**Scripted monologue:** Some stations simply have a host or expert read a long script about how to plant cassava or store maize. *This usually does not make good radio!* Listeners tire of a single voice, and they especially tire of a single voice telling them what to do!

However, there might be times when it makes sense for the host to do a brief monologue. For example, you might want to:

* provide an update on a story you have already covered in depth
* cover a subject that you haven't had time to report on with more complicated formats such as interviews
* provide a humorous or satirical observation on a current situation

However, avoid this format as much as you can, especially for long pieces. It might be cheap, but it does not serve listeners well, and it can reflect a lack of creative effort or imagination, and a lack of connection with farmers.

**Town hall:** A town hall discussion is just a great big panel that includes an on-location audience as participants. The host is the moderator, often with some expert panellists to get the discussion going. It is up to the host to keep the discussion lively by encouraging interesting and productive questions and comments. Town hall discussions are a highly visible way to provide ownership to the listening audience. They are usually recorded and edited for playback.

**Diary:** A diary is a narrator-less story in which the diarist simply talks about his or her own experience. As presented on-air, there is no intermediary or censor between the diarist and the audience; the diarist simply tells his or her story. Diarists are encouraged to speak in their local language, and normally talk for 5-7 minutes. Diarists may be people who face extraordinary situations, such as people living with HIV and AIDS. Or they may be ordinary people with special stories to tell, such as people employed in occupations which are dying out as culture and technology changes.

Diary segments are typically broadcast as one element of a weekly magazine-type program. But an extensive interview is needed to collect enough material to make a well-focused diary piece, as most people are not sure how interesting their personal story is, or even *what* their personal story is. The key is establishing the relationship between interviewer and diarist so that the resulting material is open and honest. Diaries require considerable interviewing skill: questions are edited out, so interviewing skill is required to avoid gaps in understanding or awkward transitions in the final piece.

Radio diaries are relatively easy and inexpensive to produce. Diaries can, over time, cover a broad range of issues, and can be highly effective at changing social behaviour in positive ways.

In some cases, diaries are the cornerstone of a magazine program, and other elements of the program focus on the same issues as the diaries.

**Tape-talk:** This is half interview, half documentary. A reporter goes to a village, interviews farmers, and then edits their comments. The reporter then creates a script in which the host asks the reporter questions in a conversational tone, and the reporter replies with her own words, interspersed with clips from the field interviews. The clips illustrate points, convey emotion, take the audience to a new place, and develop a character. Tape-talks are easier and quicker to create than a documentary, but require good performances from both host and reporter.

The tape-talk introduces a new voice (the reporter) to your program, and allows you to broadcast field interviews even when the host has not been able to travel.

**Mini-documentary:** A radio documentary or “feature” is a program devoted to covering a particular topic in some depth, usually through a mixture of interviews with people involved with the topic, scripted transitions, commentary and debates, accompanied by appropriate sound. This format requires a good story sense, writing and performance expertise, and good recording and interviewing skills. It is time-consuming to produce. But a short five to seven minute documentary can engage the audience, take them on a journey, introduce them to interesting people, and provide useful information.

It is usually a good idea to get some experience with the tape-talk format before trying a documentary. Remember that a documentary is also a story, even if it has a policy or other point to make. Good characters drive a good documentary.

Here are some key tips for making a short documentary with impact:

* If you can write it better and shorter than your guest said it, then do it.
* When editing, make sure that you keep the very best, the "golden" quotes from all your interviews. Often, these will be the quotes that are expressed with feeling and emotion.
* Put numbers and hard facts into your scripted sections.
* Keep your scripted, linking sections as short as possible. Listeners are more interested in hearing from your guests.

Don't be afraid to play back-to-back clips with different guests commenting on the same topic or answering the same question. Just be sure to identify the guests before and after the segment so that listeners do not get lost.

**Formats used outside of a magazine program**

The following two formats are normally broadcast outside of a regular magazine program.

**Radio spots:** Spots are short (normally 30-60 second), “catchy” presentations or announcements that communicate a single, clear message. They have been widely used in social marketing, for example to advertise condom brands or insecticide-treated bed nets. They are widely used to communicate messages about desirable or healthy behaviours, ranging from sexual behaviour to hygiene.

Spots often show people doing the right thing and having their lives improve as a result. They use voices which are clear, reflect the listener’s community, and/or have an authoritative, trustworthy tone.

Radio spots are relatively easy and inexpensive to create. Because they are short, they are easily inserted in tight schedules, and can be included in programs that already have an audience – there is no need for a campaign to build listenership. Spots are flexible: the message and broadcast schedule can be easily changed.

Spots can take a number of forms: mini-dramas, announcements, endorsements from personalities or authorities; vox pops, collages, or montages; dialogues, musical jingles, question and answer formats, or quizzes.

Remember that a well-produced spot can be used over and over again. So develop it carefully to ensure that it will remain fresh and effective with repeated use.

**Promos:** Promos are short pieces, 10-30 seconds long on average, produced for broadcast *outside* of your farmer program. The purpose of the promo is to:

* *reach an audience* of both regular listeners and potential listeners, and
* *give them a reason to tune in next time* – to the next episode of your program

A promo should always answer the question: *"Why should I bother to tune in to the next program?"*

Some producers don't bother to create a promo for each program, and some stations do not bother to provide airtime for promos. They are wrong. The promo is an essential part of the service that the program and the radio station should provide to farmers. It is the most important audience-building activity you can do, apart from your regular program.

If, for some very good reason, you can't create a *specific promo* for your next episode, make sure that you have a very well-produced *generic promo* for your radio program that you can air in the promo slots.

**Conclusion**

As you can see, there are many possible formats for passing on information and for engaging your audience. Experiment with some new formats – maybe a few spots, a vox pop, or a panel discussion or town hall meeting. Don’t forget to get feedback from farmer-listeners on how they like the new formats. The more format “tools” you have at your disposal, the more diverse, interesting, engaging, compelling and successful your radio programs will be.

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