

Pack 101, Item 2

Type: Broadcaster-how-to

March 2015

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Creative ways to get audience feedback

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Some stations are located in remote areas, far from fast Internet connections and good mobile phone networks. Other radio stations have good services themselves, but serve listeners in areas which lack these resources. In either case, it can be difficult to interact with listeners by using phones, using services such as beep-to-vote which depend on adequate mobile networks, or social media such as Facebook.

Not long ago, rural radio stations interacted with their listeners in two main ways: face-to-face visits – either at the radio station or in the community – and through letters sent by listeners. But sometimes even this kind of interaction is difficult. Transportation to and from remote communities can be challenging, especially during the rainy season. Mail may be slow and unreliable.

This broadcaster-how-to document highlights two stations that faced these circumstances and found creative ways to interact with their audience and include their listeners in their programs.

Izuba Radio

Izuba Radio is a Farm Radio International broadcasting partner in Kibungo, in the Eastern province of Rwanda. The station created a way to interact with its listeners based on the traditional Rwandan concept of *imboni*, which means “the centre of the eye.”

*Imboni* are people who act as focal points for the station within a community. *Imboni*:

* inform the station about community stories to cover
* respond to topics discussed on the air
* help produce live programs in the field
* suggest ways to improve the station’s programs
* explain the station’s advertising rates and policies so listeners can advertise their products without making a lengthy business trip to the station
* cover stories in their community and send them to the station. Journalists at Izuba Radio then read through the story, edit it, and air the story.

Izuba Radio has about 100 *imboni* in all four provinces of Rwanda, and one in Uganda. The station has helped *imboni* form small self-help groups to support each other.

Stories from *imboni* are mostly hand-written and face a long journey to reach the radio station, although recently, the station added a telephone line on which *imboni* can record their story without having to travel to the station.

Izuba Radio has trained some *imboni* in storytelling by Izuba Radio, in partnership with IREX Rwanda and Search for Common Ground. The station also gives *imboni* an annual refresher course on basic journalism skills.

*Imboni* have played a major role in Izuba Radio’s programming. They helped create three programs currently on the station’s programming schedule:

1. *Inshuti za Izuba Radio*, or “Friends of Izuba Radio show time.” This program is hosted by *imboni* who present success stories from their village, mainly about farming. Because the program is hosted by community members, many listeners are attracted to the show. By listening to their fellow villagers speak on air, listeners say they feel as if they are part of the radio station team.
2. A live talk show called *Abajyinama*, which means “Let’s share views and ideas.” Invited MPs discuss unity and reconciliation in Rwanda. During one show, a group of *imboni* called in and asked to appear on the program to speak about land issues and conflicts. A group of MPs convened a subsequent program which mainly discussed land issues. The program solved many people’s problems.
3. The third program is *Jya kumulimo* or “Wake up and go to work,” which airs from 5-6 a.m.

Radio Biso na Biso

For several years, Privat Tiburce Massanga was the manager of a community radio station called Radio Biso na Biso in Pokola, in the forests of northern Congo. The station served both Bantu and indigenous or *Mbendjele* villages within reach of its signal. It is difficult to access villages in this area because of the lack of roads or other means of transportation.

Radio Biso na Biso interacts with its listeners by mobile phone, through surface mail, and through *community reporters* who record villagers’ voices.

The station has community reporters in some villages, especially *Mbendjele* villages. Their role is to record villagers’ views and messages, and to make recordings of cultural events such as festivals and traditional ceremonies. Community reporters send their cassette recordings to the station as the opportunity arises – by truck, motorcycle, pirogue or by sending the tapes with someone who is travelling towards Radio Biso na Biso.

Villagers are thus able to listen to their own messages on the radio, including their feedback on other programs broadcast by the station. Villagers whose voices are aired are identified by name and by village.

Sometimes, a program or individual topic is so “popular” that the whole village invades the community reporter, and wants to respond. In cases like this, the reporters hold a draw to choose two or three people to record their responses in public to send to the station. On the recording, you can hear the positive or negative reactions of the other villagers after each word or sentence on the tape.

There are challenges, of course. Many times, the tapes sent by the community reporters have been detoured before reaching their destination. Either the person carrying the message changes direction (for example, the carrier might be fisherman or hunter who changed direction to sell goods to the best markets), or the tapes were lost in transit. Sometimes the person carrying the letter roamed through the bush for many days, visiting many villages. There have also been times when the content of the tape didn’t match the topic, probably due to lack of literacy skills on the people who sent them.

The station implements feedback from the villages, collected by community reporters. For example, the villagers requested that a particular program play more traditional music, which the station then did. In addition, the station responded to villagers’ recorded questions on HIV and AIDS, including questions about HIV testing and support for users of anti-retroviral drugs. The station was also able to provide listeners with questions they asked of the Ministry of Forestry on the problem of boundaries between protected areas and farming or hunting areas.

If you face some of the same difficulties as these two stations, perhaps you can learn from them. Or perhaps you have found other creative ways of reaching hard-to-reach listeners. If so, we’d love to hear about it. Please contact FRI’s Managing editor, Vijay Cuddeford at: vcuddeford@farmradio.org

**Acknowledgements**

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 Project undertaken with the financial support of the Government of Canada through the Department of Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development (DFATD)