

# Pack 102, Item 9

Type: Broadcaster-how-to

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**BH2 – How to create an effective call-in program**

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***What is a call-in?***

A call-in is a radio *format* that gives many listeners an opportunity to comment live on a topic of interest. A call-in can be one *segment* within a radio program, or it can be a radio program on its own. “Phone-in” is often used in place of “call-in.” The two terms mean the same thing.

***How can it help me serve my listeners better?***

- It increases the amount of information and opinion my listeners have on an important topic.

- It helps my listeners form opinions on important topics.

- It emboldens my listeners to speak on air about important issues, and be heard.

- It helps my community make progress on a problem.

- It helps my community share an emotional moment.

***How can it help me produce better programs?***

- It provides evidence about how important (or unimportant) a topic is for my listeners, and whether (or not) I should cover it more in the future.

- It introduces me to knowledgeable, opinionated, articulate listeners I can interview for future programs. (Get their location and phone number.)

***How do I get started?*** (Learn more about these and other points in the *Details* section below.)

🡺 Choose a topic of interest and concern to your listeners.

🡺 Focus it with a question.

🡺 Feature a knowledgeable guest.

🡺 Keep comments short and focused.

🡺 Abide by your country’s call-in regulations.

***Details***

**- Choose a topic of interest and concern to your listeners**

- Some call-ins help a community address an important issue (e.g., “Why is the maize harvest lower this year?”)

- Some help a community share its emotions (For example, they can allow callers to offer tributes on the death of a respected elder).

- Some call-ins are for sheer entertainment (e.g., “Who is our country’s best football player?”)

A call-in should be about something that touches the lives of your listeners, and is important to them.

**- Focus it with a question** If the issue is about the decline in maize harvests, then ask listeners to answer a focused, emotional question, such as: “Did you harvest enough maize to feed your family all year?” Ask every caller to answer that question, and then let them go on about why, or what the problem is. When someone calls in, don’t just say ”hello” and let them talk. State the topic question and ask the caller to answer it. This will remind other callers that they are to speak to the topic question.

**- Feature a knowledgeable guest** Call-ins should be a source of both *heat* and *light*. The heat will come from the opinions expressed by callers. The light can come from an invited studio guest who knows the topic well, and who can provide clarifications and additional information as required. Sometimes valuable new information can be provided by callers who are close to the issue.

**- Keep comments short** **and focused** A call-in’s role is to help many listeners to express their opinions and feelings. It is usually not appropriate to let a few callers go on and on at the expense of the many who want to express their views too. Some callers will try to talk about something else that interests them— and not answer the call-in question. You owe it to your audience to steer those callers back to the original question. For example, you could say: “Mrs. X, some day we should perhaps have a call-in about goats getting into gardens, but today, can you tell our listeners about how much maize you harvested this year?”

**- Abide by your country’s call-in regulations** In some countries, call-in programs are simply not allowed, and a station could have its license revoked. In other countries, call-in programs must be *time-delayed* so that the broadcaster can eliminate any illegal or objectionable comments before they go to air. In other jurisdictions, broadcasters must keep the name and telephone number of everyone who speaks on air. Check with your station management to find out about the regulations that govern your call-in programs.

***Other points to create exciting and useful call-ins***

**Prepare!** Call-ins are *live* programs. The more you can think about what might happen during the program, the better prepared you will be to respond to surprises that are thrown at you during the program. This is especially important if your call-in topic is a controversial one, such as “Is the local council helping farmers?” Preparations for this kind of call-in might include:

- Setting up call-outs to a couple of people who have predictable but opposing opinions on the topic, to get the ball rolling.

- Thinking of the extreme points of view that some callers might express, and how you will handle them.

- Preparing to get a range of views on air, if callers overwhelmingly represent just one point of view.

**Understand the challenging role of the host** The call-in host has a complex role to play, and it requires a lot of skill to do it right. She must:

- know the topic well

- help callers clarify points that might not be clear to listeners

- be able to sniff out trouble before it goes too far

- be friendly and polite but also firm

- keep the right emotional tone for the program, (for example, having fun with callers when appropriate, and being more serious or formal when required)

- not choose sides, but try to get all important sides to air

- pick up on important points raised by callers, and ask callers to elaborate

- be able to fill time when no one calls

- sense when a caller has had enough time and gently say goodbye to them

- … and much more!

**Respect your callers** Remember that you don’t have a program unless you have callers! Listeners will phone in if they hear other callers being treated with respect. Thank listeners for calling. And if they are not used to speaking on air, encourage them, and help them express their opinions clearly. If someone calls for the first time, celebrate that. It will encourage others to make their first call.

**Deal with serious unsubstantiated facts** If a caller states something important as a fact, and you either doubt it or you don’t know if it is a fact, deal with it. Don’t let your listeners assume that it is a fact because it was on the air.

For example, if a caller says, “We all know that most of the council budget is being spent in the Southern Region,” and if you cannot verify or correct that statement, you should say something like the following: “Mr. Inoussa, that is quite a statement you have just made. I do not know if it is a fact. Perhaps other listeners will want to agree or disagree with you on this.” If you have journalistic resources at your station, you could also say something like this: “Mr. Inoussa, that is quite a claim you have made. I will have our News department check into this and we will report our findings at the beginning of our next call-in.”

**Use a studio operator** A call-in makes great demands on the host. It is hard to do all of the host’s tasks listed above *and* answer calls. If you have more than one call-in line, consider having a second person in the studio to operate for you and take the calls. The operator can also review text messages and read some of the interesting ones on air.

**Consider screening the callers** If you have multiple call-in lines, and if you have a large volume of callers, it makes sense to screen them to get a range of people and opinions and locations to air. It also helps to avoid extreme comments, off-topic comments and too-regular callers. The screener can get the caller’s name, the place they are calling from, their mobile number, and the main comment they want to make. Don’t screen out a caller simply because you do not agree with their opinion! The studio operator can also be the screener.

**Overcome gender imbalance with a second line** Women listeners typically have much poorer access to mobile phones than male listeners.Also, they often lack the time needed to make the repeat calls necessary to get through, and give up after the first or second failed call. But most topics are of interest to both women and men. In order to get more women’s comments to air, have at least two call-in lines, and dedicate one of them to women callers. In this way, you can usually ensure that 50% of the voices you put on air will be those of women.

**Use a call-in to advance a community issue** Sometimes the experience of callers can help a community to identify and move ahead on an important topic. For example, if your call-in question is, “Has the extension agent been in your area over the past month?” and if many callers say no, this can embolden the local government to ask the extension department why there is no agent in the field. And if your question is, “Has your daughter been bothered by strangers on her walk to and from school?” and if many callers say yes, then the community knows it has a problem to tackle.

**Promote your call-in** Run promos during the week before your next call-in. Give your listeners time to think about the topic, and what they might want to say.

**Watch for praise callers** Sometimes a powerful person will ask someone else to phone in and praise the powerful person on air, regardless of the topic. It is unfair to give airtime to such callers. Gently ask the caller if they want to answer the call-in question, and if they do not, then gently move on to the next caller.

**Manage the regular caller** If your goal is to get as many voices on air as possible, you don’t want a few callers to dominate your call-ins. But, if you know of a few regular callers who are articulate and who provide useful information and express interesting points of view, then find a way to let them speak—as long as they abide by your rules about the frequency and length of calls.

**Cut the cost to the caller** Get a toll-free number. Or make a deal with your service provider. Ask them to make all calls to the call-in free. This will boost both the *number* of callers and the *kind* of callers, and make the comments more representative of the whole community.

**Don’t draw wrong conclusions!** If ten listeners get to air and eight of them say that they had worse maize harvests this year, don’t conclude that eight out of *every* ten people in your area had worse maize harvests. What you *can* say on air at the end of your call-in is that “eight out of the ten callers you heard had worse crops this year.” What you *cannot* say is that “80% of farmers in this region had worse crops this year.”

The reason why you need to be careful about the conclusions you draw is because a call-in does not have the accuracy of, for example, a random door-to-door survey. Consider the limitations. The call-in caller:

- must have access to a mobile phone

- must be prepared to pay for the call (unless calls are free)

- must feel comfortable speaking in public, and on this issue

- must be able to listen to your call-in program at this time

In other words, the call-in caller may not be representative of your whole community.

Also, with political topics, people tend to call based on their level of motivation. Sometimes a topic triggers callers who want *change,* while the “silent majority”—listeners who are satisfied with *things as they are*—won’t bother to call.

**Tell listeners the rules** A successful call-in needs a few rules. Tell your listeners *in advance* what those rules are. The rules can be as simple as this:

*“We want to hear from as many listeners, with as many points of view, as possible. And we ask everyone to stick to today’s topic. Priority will be given to people who have not phoned in for the past month. And remember that Zoom FM does not tolerate profanity, insults or hate speech.”*

Since all listeners know your rules (because you broadcast them every week), it will not come as a surprise to a caller, or to your listeners in general, when you have to say, “Ms. Muta, you know our call-in rules. I must cut you off now and go on to the next caller. I apologize to our listeners for that last remark by Ms. Muta.”

**Start small** If you haven’t done a call-in before, start with a relatively simple and uncontroversial subject or question like, “Is your maize harvest better than last year?” With the experience you gain, you can move on to more complex and/or controversial topics like, “Does the government’s fertilizer subsidy help you?” or “Is our elected representative helping farmers?”

**“Prime the pump”** If you want listeners to voice strong opinions during the call-in, then give your listeners an example of a strong opinion in advance. Go out and record some “vox pop” interviews. Ask people the call-in question that will be featured in the coming program. Take the most interesting and energetic statements and use them in a promo that runs during the week before the call-in. Then replay those strong opposing opinions in the intro to the program.

**Avoid dead air** There is nothing more embarrassing than no-one calling in! This might be because the topic is not of general interest. Or perhaps the topic question has simply not triggered the interest of listeners. Or it might just be that listeners want to hear more about the topic before they call in. Here are a few ways to reduce the chances of having long stretches with no callers.

- Choose the topic and the topic question carefully.

- Have a knowledgeable studio guest who can chat about the topic while waiting for callers.

- Have some pre-recorded “vox pop” clips ready to play.

- Prepare one or more people you know and who you can rely on to comment.

- Prepare someone at your station to be ready to chat with you.

**Learn about your audience in other ways too** A call-in—or better still, many call-ins—will give you a growing understanding about what is important to your listeners. But don’t stop with call-ins! Visit the villages you serve, meet with women farmers, meet with men farmers, ask them what is important to them. [Check here](http://scripts.farmradio.fm/radio-resource-packs/package-95-researching-and-producing-farmer-focused-programs/how-to-learn-about-your-audience-and-what-audience-members-need-from-your-program/) to learn about audience research. You can also use on-air polling to find out what a lot of people think about something. With these polls, you will hear from hundreds of listeners, rather than the ten or twenty who get to air on a call-in. These polls are sometimes called “Beep-to-vote” or “flash voting.” Learn more about “flash voting” in [this document about how to gather regular feedback from your audience](http://scripts.farmradio.fm/radio-resource-packs/101-getting-and-using-audience-feedback-and-evaluating-radio-programs/gathering-regular-feedback-from-your-audience/).

**Be alert to hate speech** *Direct* hate speech can be obvious (for example, “The Zumu people have stolen all the good land.”) But people who want to convey hateful messages often talk about a group *indirectly (for example, “We know who has all the good land.”)* When you detect hateful speech, you can reply with: “Mr. Kalo, I am sure you would be offended if someone said that about you. Let’s move on to our next caller, who is…” Have a discussion in your station to find out if anyone else is having problems with hate speakers, and develop a station-wide policy on how to define hate speech, identify it on air, and deal with it. Also, develop a station-wide editorial plan to deal with the problems that are the root causes of hate speech.

**Do callers have to be identified on air?** Most callers are comfortable giving their names and locations. But some people might face censure in their home or their community for speaking out. This is a sensitive issue. On the one hand, you do not want to give anonymous callers the chance to speak critically about other people. On the other hand, you do not want to silence people who feel threatened by other people.

You do not have to broadcast the name of every caller. However, you should ask for each caller’s name and community *off-air* before you let them go on air. (This is where it helps to have a second person operating the call-in program.) You can introduce such a caller as follows: “We will now hear from a woman who has had deep experience in this area. She chooses not to give her name.” If you use a procedure like this, you will open your call-in program to a wider audience, and a wider range of views, including people who might otherwise have no voice in community affairs.

For a few very controversial topics, you might want to mention the name of every caller on air. In this case, you can start the program with a statement such as, “Since this is a very controversial topic, and out of fairness to all concerned, today we are going to ask every caller to give their name before they speak on air.”

***Where else can I learn about call-ins?***

*- Internews* has produced an excellent toolkit on how to do all kinds of interactive radio programming. It can be accessed at this website: <http://www.internews.org/research-publications/interactive-radio-toolkit-stations>

***Definitions***

A *format* is a specific way that sounds and words are assembled for use in a radio program. Formats include interviews, panel discussions, dramas, vox pops, story-telling, documentaries, tape-talks, host monologues, etc.

An *on-air poll* is a radio format in which a radio station invites listeners to respond to specific questions by phoning the station. The station usually reports the results of the poll live within the same program.

A *promo* is a brief message designed to build your audience and encourage listeners to tune in to your farmer program.

*Regulations* and rules are tools that countries use to make broadcasters comply with the terms of their license and with the laws of the land. Countries can impose warnings, fines, and temporary or permanent closure on stations that do not comply.

A *segment* is any one (usually regular) part of a radio program.

A *time-delayed* program uses technology to create a brief time period (for example, 10 seconds) between the moment when a caller speaks and when those words are broadcast. If a caller makes inappropriate or even illegal comments, the station has time to stop those comments from being broadcast.

A *vox pop* is a radio format in which a broadcaster goes out into the community and asks a range of people the same questions on a topic. The recorded replies are usually edited for length and focus, and are broadcast within a program dealing with that topic. (Vox pop is from the Latin, “vox populi,” meaning “voice of the people.”)

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