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All about JACK

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FOR A 3-YEAR-OLD, JACK is well-traveled. He's already taken up residence in places such as Los Angeles, Baltimore, Philadelphia and, most recently, New York.

JACK is a new radio format causing heated debate as stations from coast to coast drop their old music rotations to adopt JACK's 1,200-song playlist of hits drawn largely from the 1970s through 1990s.

When WCBS-FM 101.1 in New York abruptly severed its oldies programming earlier this month and emerged from the ruins as JACK-FM, it set off a tempest among fans.

At the heart of the JACK controversy lies the question of what makes music radio successful -- the songs alone, or the songs presented by a radio personality.

Like New York's JACK-FM, about 60 percent of JACK stations have no disc jockeys, said **Sean Ross, a media analyst for Edison Media Research in Somerville.**

"Some people find it refreshing," he said. "And some people miss the DJs. And it usually breaks down about 50-50."

A low percentage of the nation's radio stations don't have DJs, said Mark Fratrick, vice president of BIA Financial Network, which studies the media, among other industries. Success is probably not widespread among those that don't, he added.

Names like "JACK" are meant to give stations character, inviting listeners to feel an allegiance to a spot on the dial in the same way they're intimate with friends or neighbors, Ross said.

Though JACK alienates some people, the format that originated in Canada around 2002 -- or variations of it (it's called Ben in Philadelphia) -- has fared reasonably well in other parts of the country.

KJJK-FM in Dallas and KCJK-FM in Kansas City, which switched to JACK in 2004, were ranked 12th in their markets in the winter quarter of 2005, according to Arbitron Inc., the media research firm that measures radio listenership. Both stations compete with more than 24 others.

In Jackson, Mich., the local JACK station, WWJK-FM, came in at number 5.

"It is always good for the business to have formats that people feel passionately about," Ross said. "It's a shame that in New York and in some other markets, having JACK had to equal not having CBS-FM."

Rob Barnett, president of programming for Infinity Broadcasting, which owns JACK-FM in New York and seven other JACK stations, says it may appeal to a younger audience.

Bowing to advertisers, the radio industry is most interested in the 25- to 54-year-old demographic. Young

listeners aren't tuning in, a problem that could follow the industry into its future since habits develop at an early age, Fratrik said.

"WCBS, in the most recent ratings for people 25 to 54 in this area, was ranked 14th," said Barnett, who believes the new format will do a better job targeting that demographic.

Switching to JACK in New York was a risk for Infinity Broadcasting, as WCBS-FM was one of the top 10 competitors in a tough market, Ross said.

About 95 percent of Americans listen to radio, but the average person in the United States listens to three fewer hours per week than a decade ago, according to Arbitron.

After sharp double-digit revenue increases in the late 1990s, the industry's growth has not been able to keep up in recent times with the economy, Fratrik said.

Revenue growth in Arbitron-rated markets that was as high as 14 percent in 1999 dropped to around 3 percent in 2003, according to Fratrik. Projections from BIA show growth floating at about 4 percent through at least 2009.

Fratrik believes those who work in radio remain confident of the sector's ability to be lucrative in coming years.

"While there hasn't been tremendous growth lately, there is always the potential of finding a new thing," he said.

JACK is a way companies can distinguish their stations from others in cluttered markets, Fratrik said.

Art Rooney, who hosts an afternoon show with music from the 1950s-80s on WGHT-AM 1500, based in Pompton Lakes, sees it differently. He believes that with its endless stream of songs from Madonna to the Beastie Boys, the JACK format won't be successful in the long run because it lacks a human element.

"You just keep playing cut after cut after cut after cut," he said. "You can take an orangutan, and if you train them properly, you know what I'm saying? Any radio station can do what they're doing.

"A personal touch to your audience," Rooney said. "With the death of CBS-FM, that is gone."

JACK-FM is limited to a few comments between songs and into commercials. But that doesn't mean the station lacks local flavor, Barnett said.

"When something happens in its local market, JACK is able to respond immediately with his own sense of humor," said Barnett, who refers to JACK interchangeably as a person and a thing.

"Sen. Charles Schumer (D-New York) chose to enter the radio broadcasting arena with comments about the format change at 101.1 FM," he said. "JACK within hours responded ... JACK's response? 'Hey, Chuckie Schumer, you worry about our teachers -- JACK'll handle the music.'"

Rooney, who had his first radio gig in 1966, sees JACK purely as part of the industry's push to attract younger listeners, and calls it "programming to Madison Avenue."

But what appeals to Miami and Dallas will not necessarily find devotees in the New York market, where fans have a soft spot for on-air personalities, Rooney said.

"It is not going to work in New York. They have taken a station that really meant a lot to its audience and they've destroyed it," he said.

Despite the outrage that has followed JACK wherever it travels, Ross predicts the format will become a phenomenon within the next year or two.

"Every market will get one," he said. "Some of the stations, they'll find the sweet spot in their market. Some will be long-term, and some will not."

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