

WBAI Rescue: what is "Necessary & Sufficient"?

Frank LeFever
WBAI "Guerrilla Volunteer"

In scientific search for causes of an event, one asks what is necessary and sufficient for that event to occur. What I propose may not be sufficient, but I assert it is necessary. What is necessary is making WBAI known to the vast number of 18,000,000 potential listeners in the signal area who do not even know that WBAI exists. I will outline a specific strategy in making WBAI known, with examples of specific tactics. I will suggest ways in which this can be co-ordinated with programming as part of the improvement many people (including myself) see as necessary for long-term survival. Of particular importance are my schemes for doing this "on the cheap", including (but not limited to) active participation by WBAI listeners.

Listener attrition

Some current listeners began listening more than 1/2 century ago. Inevitably, of earlier cohorts, increasing numbers will depart by moving out of the area or even by such extreme measures as dying. Over the past decade, we have been losing about 1000 members per year. This rate is excessive even according to urban mortality statistics, so some may be leaving because programming WBAI no longer interests them. Whatever the explanation, we are obviously not replacing departing old members even at a rate to maintain the same level of listener support and obviously we need to replace them at a rate that exceeds rate of attrition. Do the math: twice the number of members means half the time we need to devote to "pitching" for donations (which demonstrably is itself a cause of attrition: when Arbitron data has been available and listener numbers were high enough to make the data statistically reliable, listenership has been shown to decline sharply during on-air fund drives.

WBAI "under the radar"

For several years, I vigorously leafleted progressive and/or anti-war events (marches, meetings, etc.) with flyers advertising WBAI (samizdat flyers, of my own design, made by myself and copied by the hundreds for each event). The most common response, among young adults who were more-than-average attuned to political, social, economic issues, more-than-average educated, etc., was "*Huh? WBAI? What's that?*"

(Not) Making WBAI known to the General Public (= potential listeners)

At the very first LSB meeting, in Public Comment, I expressed my surprise that there seemed to be nobody at WBAI whose job included responsibility for making WBAI known to non-listeners. A decade later, that is still my observation but the surprise has faded. A recent job description for "Development Director" includes a reference to "advertising", but this is far down on the list and clearly not a major part of the job.

As a member of the Finance Committee, it boggled my mind to see that a \$3-Million company dependent on "customer" support allotted a piddling \$3000 annually for "advertising". A few years ago it was raised to \$10,000, and more recently to \$16,500. Numerous sources describe various ways of calculating what a business should spend on advertising, but "between 5% and 7% of sales" is a common estimate. For annual "sales" totaling about \$2.6M (counting only donations under \$1000), this works out to \$130,000 - \$182,000 for WBAI instead of the \$16,404 tentatively proposed for FY 2013.

If this full amount (\$16,404) were to be spent for its stated purpose, it would still be an absurdly low percent of total expenditures. However, there is no evidence that any expenditures for advertising were made in last year's budget. (Nor in a few prior years' budgets.)

What do you "see" when you see "WBAI"? (how should we be "branding" WBAI?)

Wikipedia says WBAI is *"...non-commercial, listener-supported...Its programming is leftist/progressive and a mixture of political news and opinion from a leftist perspective, tinged with aspects of its complex and varied history, such as Freeform radio, which WBAI played a role in developing, as well as various music."*

Wikipedia elsewhere speaks of Community Radio: *"Community radio is a radio service offering a third model of radio broadcasting in addition to commercial and public broadcasting. Community stations serve geographic communities and communities of interest. They broadcast content that is popular and relevant to a local, specific audience but is often overlooked by commercial or mass-media broadcasters. Community radio stations are operated, owned, and influenced by the communities they serve. They are generally nonprofit and provide a mechanism for enabling individuals, groups, and communities to tell their own stories, to share experiences and, in a media-rich world, to become creators and contributors of media."*

WBAI needs to make itself synonymous with "grassroots", "community", "non-commercial", "listener-supported" and "independent" in ways that go beyond just saying that's what it is. This should be part of an "image" that comes readily to mind whenever one hears "WBAI 99.5 FM NYC." I propose that we work to make WBAI synonymous with **"a community that works to bring diverse communities of interest together"**. I propose to make this obvious from the way we promote WBAI, not only in its promotional messages but in its methods of promotion. This begins with use of broadcast time to recruit volunteers, for work at the station and for help in advertising WBAI.

"WBAI the Volunteer Station"

There are TWO reasons to recruit volunteers on air (as vigorously as we pitch for donations). One reason is obvious: to get help, compensating for our dwindling cash resources and paid staff. The other less obvious: creating an image of WBAI as "participatory", "grassroots", "community based". Listener supported not only by donations of money but by donations of time. Moreover, "Volunteer recruitment" in other venues (beyond airtime, in other media) can be a very effective advertisement that subtly contributes to its "branding".

Seek opportunities to include "stats" in our on-air and other-venue promotions, such as **"80% of our producers are unpaid volunteers; other volunteers work behind the scenes, assisting broadcasters (developing content, fact-checking, etc.), maintaining and repairing equipment, answering phones and doing clerical work. Some help by advertising and promoting in their local communities or in their communities of interest, in person or online via social networking (Facebook, Twitter, etc.)."** In this context or other contexts, list some of the "communities of interest" WBAI serves (progressive political dialogue and activism, ecology

and sustainable living, healthful nutrition, very old music, very new music, theater, etc.) and ask *"is your community of interest represented? If not, please tell us what it is and suggest ways we might serve that community. WBAI is a community devoted to bringing diverse communities together."*

We should become known for dialogue within communities and between communities. Some of what we do already conveys this (e.g. call-ins and discussions on programs such as Talk Back). The proposals for increased on-air (and online) cultivation (or restoration) of a "volunteer culture", involvement of volunteers in station promotion, and on-air recognition of volunteers have this public image and this reality as major goals.

Specific advertising schemes

There are several low-budget (or "no budget") ways to make WBAI known to the vast number of people within broadcast-signal who have currently have no idea that WBAI exists. They range from very simple, easy to implement by 1 or 2 people within a day to more complex and requiring some planning, community- or organization-outreach, and coordination with on-air programming. All involve making fuller use of an underutilized resource: our listeners.

Simplest and easiest ("no brainers", almost no \$)

(1) Place this message on air (daily, more than once) and on the wbai.org home page: *In the more than half century WBAI has been on air, many long-time listeners have moved out of signal range, and some have "passed on" to the land from which no one returns. We need to recruit new listeners if WBAI is to survive. Millions of newcomers have never heard of WBAI. We need your help in telling them about it. Please look at the "Promote WBAI" page at wbai.org for ways you can do this.*

FOR ON-AIR USE, ADD:

"If you cannot access the internet, send us a postcard or letter asking us how you can help, with your name and address clearly printed."

(2) One of the ways listed there will be:

"Download and make multiple copies of one of the handbills (leaflets, flyers) from our online collection. [click here] Distribute them as you think best: you know your neighborhood, your community, your school or workplace better than we do! Distribute them at concerts, marches, demonstrations, block parties -- use your imagination!"

For those saying they are unable to download and print, consider mailing a set-rate Priority Mail small carton full of flyers.

(3) With EVERY mailing for ANY purpose, enclose one such flyer, with this message:

"We appreciate you for more than your cash donations; we appreciate your knowledge of your communities -- neighborhoods, communities of interest, etc. We trust you to know where and how best to distribute copies of this flyer to make WBAI known to people who have never heard of WBAI."

Options can vary, but I believe the best flyer will feature a plain B & W Program Grid.

Online promotion by listeners

On-air and on the WBAI website, listeners should be asked to donate at least one hour per week to promoting WBAI online. Targets should include not just Facebook Friends but selected Facebook "Pages" dedicated to various communities of interest. These "Pages" (also some Facebook "Groups") represent many special-interest communities: "anti-fracking", political action (some national, some regional, some local), artistic forms and genres, science, literature, sustainable energy production, health & nutrition, etc. etc. etc.

Listeners should be encouraged (on air and on the WBAI website) to seek out and "Like" such FB Pages (FB cant for "join") so that they may post messages there.

WBAI's instructions to listeners who volunteer to do this should emphasize the importance of including this line somewhere in their promotional message: **"WBAI 99.5 FM in NYC and streaming all over the world at <http://wbai.org>"** (if "http://" is included, FB will generate a live link and an icon for wbai.org, increasing likelihood of recruiting listeners).

Very general promotional post: **simply posting "<http://wbai.org>" will generate an icon and a live link**, and should not be disparaged; but some text describing a favorite program might add to the impact on potential new listeners. For examples, see FB Page "Radio Volunteer Corps".

Schemes requiring more effort

I call to your attention the recent plea by a PNB Task Force for volunteers at each station to write and place items about their station in news media. Has this plea resulted in any on-air announcements at WBAI? [see text following my "Addendum"]

Schemes requiring more effort and some money

In any week of the year there are probably several hundred "community" events, ranging from small neighborhood block parties and flea markets to choral recitals and major cultural celebrations. I stumbled upon one at Columbia University one day, an annual "mela" (festival, with music, traditional dancing, poetry, food, etc.) organized by the Bangladesh Students group. I talked with organizers, who had of course never heard of WBAI -- albeit one of the performers had actually had some contact, possibly on-air exposure. The following year, their printed program included an ad I composed and paid for myself, saying that "next year" I hoped to hear part of the mela on air at WBAI.

If listeners are encouraged to tell us of such events, far enough in advance, we might be able to work out some kind of a deal: free or discount-price ad in their printed program brochure in exchange for our announcing it on air. If some cash is required, we can get more mileage out of it by saying on air, *"We have an opportunity to advertise WBAI in the program brochure for _____. It would cost _____. Will you volunteer to donate the money? If you wish, we can recognize your donation on air and/or in the printed ad."*

If there could be a weekly program presenting samples from such events (when events

include useful audio), that would be marvelous, and inviting people who organize or attend such events to listen for their "15-minutes of fame" could pay all kinds of dividends (ranging from increasing listeners to increasing volunteers to development of program proposals).

More formal and "usual" advertising tactics

These may require regular and systematic work from a designated staff person or from a volunteer with some experience in negotiating and placing ads. One such volunteer who has already placed ads for WBAI comes readily to mind; but this person has specialized in big "one-shot" ads geared to special offers or special events, and I have in mind smaller, more continuous efforts in some different media aiming, at somewhat different target-audiences.

However, whatever the media and target audiences, we should consider some ways of getting discounted rates.

For example, according to one advisory: *"Stand-by rates—Some businesses will buy the right to wait for an opening in a vehicle's broadcasting schedule; this is an option that carries considerable uncertainty, for one never knows when a cancellation or other event will provide them with an opening, but this option often allows advertisers to save between 40 and 50 percent on usual rates."*

One WBAI producer (Janet Coleman) has suggested advertising on AM radio -- an excellent idea inasmuch as the audience is pre-selected to consist mainly of people who are already (or "still") accustomed to listening to the radio (endangered species).

I would amend (or adapt) this for negotiating with print media (magazines, newspapers). Are they approaching a deadline with some "gaps" in planned advertising space? *Fill it with an already-in-hand all-season WBAI ad!* Somewhat like "papering the house" to hide unsold seats in a theater.

[Cf. also: *"Remnants and regional editions—Regional advertising space in magazines is often unsold and can, therefore, be purchased at a reduced rate."*]

This can be separate from or combined with another possible option: *"Barter—Some businesses may be able to offer products and services in return for reduced advertising rates."*

We are already bartering air-time for some goods or services when we thank merchants for supplying food for volunteers in the tally room. What are the prospects for saying something like *"We wish to thank _____ magazine for facilitating our advertising WBAI to its readers"?*

If the magazine or newspaper had used our "stand-by" ad to fill unsold space and treated it as a "charitable donation" for tax purposes, we could of course say "donating ad space to WBAI" instead of "facilitating our advertising" (they might not like our announcing that they gave us a discount). I realize that this approaches a Pacifica *tabu* area (sounds like "corporate underwriting"), so terms and wording would need to be thought through carefully, but seems to me "they tell their people about us so we tell our people about them" might go down better than "they paid us to name them on air".

Media and targets

College radio stations don't really need to advertise, do they? But they do -- in their own college newspapers! We hear a lot of talk about the greying of Pacifica and the need to recruit "youth" (= not yet eligible for Medicare), but when was the last time WBAI placed an ad in a college newspaper? For that matter, when was there a first time? Has there been one?

I would propose print ads. Partly because people reading online "newspaper" have learned to ignore online ads and moreover are ready to skip and jump away via numerous branches that will leave any such ad far behind. If you have a print copy in hand, you are more likely to notice all that's visible and there are no hyperlinks by which to escape. You might even tear out and pocket something interesting or potentially useful.

College radio stations are likely to publish "playlists". In contrast, a WBAI (plain B & W) program grid might just be novel and provocative enough to grab attention: *hey, something different!* Will 90% of college students be disappointed by lack of a "playlist"? So what? The other 10% are probably better candidates for WBAI listening, membership, and volunteering.

No doubt the print in a reduced-size Program Grid will be too small to read or see more than a hint of our variety even with a magnifying glass, which we can exploit by asking *"Can't read this clearly? Read a full-size Program Grid at WBAI.org and listen to samples."*

Needless(?) to say, an online interactive Program Grid that produced carefully-curated audio samples when specific programs were "clicked" would be an excellent thing.

As with ads placed elsewhere, we should explore "barter" options (mention the college and the college newspaper on air for reduced ad rate). We should also consider listener-community sponsorship of ads: ask on air, *"Would some alumna or alumnus of _____ like to help us place this ad in their Alma Mater's college newspaper and hear us mention this on air?"*

"Neighborhood" newspapers?

As I approach or leave the station, I see copies of *Downtown Express*, and often take a copy to read on the subway. Elsewhere, I see papers such as *The Brooklyn Eagle*, and another devoted to people and events in Queens. Not so "hip" nor so frenetic (nor so crowded) as *The Village Voice*, but perhaps reaching an audience beyond WBAI's "usual suspects" at somewhat lower rates, and reinforcing our "local community" credentials.

"Other" (online but "indirect")

This will be labor-intensive and will not target potential listeners directly in the sense of an "ad", but WBAI could build credibility as a "source" that can be cited by others (and thereby "advertised" in ways and places beyond our imagining) by providing links not to entire programs but to specific segments within programs, with appropriate key-word tags so that people Googling for information on a specific topic will be able to go directly to the segment that deals with it, rather than listening or fast-forwarding through 20 or 30 or 40 minutes before finding it. Ann Garrison, broadcasting often via KPFA and via WBAI's own *AfroBeat*

Radio has been doing this for years and for years has been urging Pacifica producers to do this (and might be willing to tutor somebody on this; I can put you in touch, as can Wuyi Jacobs). Her broadcasts and related stories compete well with others in Google searches.

Addendum: more ways to strengthen a "volunteer culture"

Everybody (almost) like to hear his or her name mentioned on air (unless mentioned "unfavorably"), so we should take every opportunity to thank volunteers on air (and on the website) by name. But we can go beyond that. I propose a brief weekly program of "Volunteer Vignettes" or "Volunteer Voices", each featuring interviews of 2 or 3 volunteers every week: 1 on-air volunteer (i.e. unpaid producer) and 1 or 2 "behind the scenes" volunteers (who do production assistance, fund-drive phone answering, equipment repair, clerical, etc.). Do NOT "pitch" for volunteers during this program (lest it sound like "infomercial"); just add "for info about volunteering, contact ____" at end of broadcast. BUT promote this program during every other explicit pitch for volunteers.

Format includes name, where from, capsule "life story", then "how did you 1st learn of WBAI (etc.) and "tell us what you do as a volunteer". For "shy" volunteers, host could perhaps read text from the volunteer, or arrange for "person congruent" readers to do this (*same age and gender as the shy volunteer*).

Done right, with flair and imagination, this could be WBAI's "*This American Life*."

Do not neglect the obvious: it is NOT obvious to the average listener that so many producers are unpaid -- i.e. VOLUNTEERS. Hence (without of course promising any airtime to future volunteers) one can mix "unknown" volunteers with volunteers who are known on-air (just not known as "volunteers"). Might some listeners be inspired by this to volunteer as producers? OK. If they present good program proposals and audition well, why not? We might get good "new blood" or at least put current producers on their toes if they think there's some competition for their inherited slots.

Off-air but with possible on-air benefits

Volunteer Recognition Celebration. Annual? Quarterly? (Fall, Winter, Spring, Summer?) Volunteers free, others pay a small sum. Volunteer musicians (recruited by producers, e.g. Bob Fass). Publicity for them IN ADVANCE, including SAMPLES. Volunteers introduced at event and in 1/2 minute blurbs ON AIR in promos. On website via audio AND VIDEO and text listing of names, etc. Possibility of editing to produce CD premium.

More on-air (& on website) "Community/Volunteer Station" image building

A further development of this theme could include such things as actively recruiting local "experts" (e.g. academics, but not limited to them) who could provide on-air content on a short-term basis.

Promotion would emphasize their "local community" origins and "volunteer" status.

For example:

Two or three professors of history or economics or science with slightly different views on some topic (e.g. "Arab Spring", or "global warming and alternative energy") in a month-long sequence of weekly (1- or 2-hr) DIALOGUES (not "debates").

For example:

Two or three NYC graphic artists discussing "art trends" in NYC, with SAMPLES of paintings (or whatever) on view at the wbai.org website.

For example:

Two or three NYC musicians or composers... [etc.]

Plea from Pacifica's Development Task Force

We have been needing this for many years: Pacifica publicists. We would appreciate your help on this. As you know, as per the motion passed by the board, we in Pacifica's Development Task Force are seeking volunteer publicists to help write articles/press releases about Pacifica for local, national and regional distribution. If you can recommend someone at your station, please refer them to the contact person on the flier for your station and/or to Pacifica board chair, Summer Reese (summerinthedesert@yahoo.com) or me. The contact people per station (as listed in the attached flier) are listed below. We are attempting to find these folks before the end of this month.

Thanks everyone.

Heather Gray
PNB Affiliate Director
hmcgray@earthlink.net

KPFT
Robert Mark
bobmark14@yahoo.com

WPFW
Campbell Johnson
ccj.caa.edi@verizon.net

KPFK
Ali Lexa
alexa@kpfk.org

KPFA
Cynthia Johnson
cyn4pacific@gmail.com

WBAI
Carolyn Birden
cmbirden@gmail.com