

Interstitial Content - The Other Local Programming

Interstitial elements produced by stations constitute large chunks of local broadcast time at considerable resource cost. In aggregate, they occupy large segments of the daily broadcast schedule. They are the periodic bundles of information and images that form a station's personality. They tell stories, inform viewers, acknowledge funders, and satisfy regulatory requirements. Yet, they are not treated with the same care as other local programs. In general practice, they are pulled together by the traffic department, bundled as expediently as possible, often left to the last minute, and almost never considered as an element to support a station's strategy. Yet they are there, every hour, available to be tuned and shaped in support of mission in ways that reinforce the station's strategic need at the moment, and agile enough to change as those needs change. They are, one could argue, the single most important element in a station's local programming armament.

Because interstitial program elements represent a significant amount of local programming produced by stations, they deserve more and closer attention. More than that, however, they need to be used as tools to deliver key messages at key times – planned carefully to coincide with important strategic moments, and budgeted inside the station as carefully as money and personnel. The key is to bring the interstitial resource into alignment with the strategic intents of the station.

Think of the resource as buckets of minutes periodically doled out to those departments that use the resource. Those buckets are filled with only enough minutes to serve the strategic need at the time. For example, membership gets more minutes in advance of a drive, and promotion gets more minutes in advance of a season premier. The amount in the buckets budgeted depends on timing and occasion. A reasonable bucket budget could be created at the beginning of the year with opportunities to amend as needed through the year. Filling the buckets should be the responsibility of a team responsible for both hitting strategic targets and for reconciling the careful use of the interstitial resource. The debates may be intense and will help focus need and concentrate the tactical approaches to the station's strategy. The team will come to agreement not only on how to mete out the resource, but also on what interstitial packages should look like. They will craft the look of the package in much the same way they would concentrate attention on building a set. In marketing terms, the interstitial package will become a primary branding tool for the station in addition to its strategic value.

How do you get there?

- Agree that a careful approach to interstitials is necessary.
- Map interstitial content. What elements make up interstitial content? I.E. underwriting, forward promotion, membership announcements, ID and branding etc. Use a sampling of past weeks as a guide. Look back and make a list of uses.
- Sift through the tactical approaches to the strategic goals and objectives and find those that will be advantaged through access to interstitial budgeting.
- Map the station's program schedule broken down by daypart and audience demographics

- Determine key messages for each daypart and/or audience segment. I.E. What makes “How To” audiences unique, and what key messages would be most valuable to convey during those times?
- Create a flexible template for each daypart/audience segment so as programming shifts, your interstitial strategy moves in parallel
- Create an interstitial team to consider interstitial opportunities, challenges, look, and production needs
- Make interstitial programming an essential element in designing the overall program grid for the station(s)

There are other recipes as well. The key ingredient is an understanding that interstitials are key elements in the local program mix and need great care and attention to best serve the needs of the station and audience. That focus will yield more consistent local image and will have the benefit of serving key strategic goals, one of which is likely to be improved local programming.