

Figure. 17.1 Everybody wants to go on the TV shoot. Everybody wants to do the big website. And then there's radio. This Fallon McElligott ad for the famous Boston studio was written by Doug DeGroot, art directed by Bob Brihn. Incidentally, they also did the ad that kicks off Chapter 17 in the sixth edition.

RADIO IS HELL. BUT IT'S A DRY HEAT.

SOME ADVICE FOR WORKING IN A TOUGH MEDIUM.

IF YOU HAVE A CHILD AGE FIVE OR YOUNGER, you already understand the basic problem facing the radio writer.

“Put that down. No, don't draw on the dog. Do *not* draw on the dog! Did you hear me? I said do *NOT* stick that crayon in the dog's...Put that down!”

Both the parent and the radio writer are talking to someone who is not listening.

In the end, parents have a slight edge. They can send their children to their room, but the poor radio writer is left to figure out a way to get customers to listen.

If you think about it, the whole radio medium is used very differently than print, online, or TV. In print, you have readers actively holding the magazine or newspaper up to their faces; they're engaged, as is the TV watcher or the Web surfer. But radio is just sort of on in the background while people stay busy doing other things. It's just *there*. People tune into and out of it depending on how interesting the material being broadcast is.

And so we're back to our old problem. We must be interesting.

First rule: do not suck.

It is one of the great mysteries of advertising. Most radio is...well, it's not very good.

Over the years, I've judged many awards shows. In every show I can remember, the judges loved poring over the print. Looking at the TV was fun. But when the time came to sit down and listen to several hours of radio commercials, the room thinned out. Nobody wanted to judge it because most of it was pretty bad. It wasn't interesting.

Senior writers at agencies often turn radio jobs over to the juniors. Great. Here's your chance. Knock it out of the park.

It pays to learn to write radio. Not many people know how. The thing is, as fast as digital technology has changed everything, radio still reaches more adults

than any other medium.¹ In fact, as long as there are carpenters, lifeguards, and cars, there's gonna be radio. Even if the day comes when the Internet gets wired directly into our brains, anyone who can write a great radio spot will likely have a job somewhere in this business. I'm not the only one who thinks this way. In *Breaking In*, creative director Rosann Calisi from Eleven said: "I think one of the most difficult things to find is a copywriter who can do radio. If I find a radio writer, to me that's like gold because that's writing in its most pure form."²

WRITING THE COMMERCIAL

Radio is visual.

It's a tired old cliché, but there's truth in it. Radio has been called "theater of the mind." The good commercials out there capitalize on this observation. In radio you can do things you can't in any other medium.

You can make listeners see the impossible image of a cactus man in a werewolf mask pour through the keyhole and eat your cat. (Actually, I did see this once in college, but I...never mind.)

The point is, in radio the canvas is large, stretching off in every direction. Radio lets you do impossible things—things way too expensive to make into TV commercials. "Hey! Let's have the entire Third U.S. Armored Division roar through the mall to go buy our client's burgers." You probably can't afford that in a TV spot. But in radio, you could.

Lewis Carroll wrote, "Sometimes I've believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast." So should you.

Cover the wall with scripts.

When you're working in radio, come up with a lot of ideas, just like you do when you write for print. You don't have to write the whole script; for now, just scribble down the general concept on a Post-it Note. Do not start writing entire scripts. Capture a line if you need to, but right now, think in whole concepts.

Come up with radio platforms you can describe in a sentence.

The most awarded radio campaign of all time can be summed up simply. With a stirring musical score, Bud Light raises its glass and extols the virtues of "unsung" American heroes. As in, "Here's to you, Mr. Giant Foam Finger Maker." (The spot

¹ "Old-fashioned terrestrial radio still reaches more adults than any other medium. According to Nielsen, 93 percent of American adults listen to AM/FM radio weekly; 87 percent watch television; and 70 percent use smartphones in a given week." *The Week* magazine, July 24, 2015, 31. NOTE: This research has not been updated. It's been six years, so it could be wrong. Send your complaints to biteme.com.

² William Burks Spencer, *Breaking In: Over 100 Advertising Insiders Reveal How to Build a Portfolio That Will Get You Hired* (London: Tuk Tuk Press, 2011), 213.

closes with: “So crack open an ice-cold Bud Light and know we speak for sports fans everywhere when we say...*you’re* number one.”)

And for Dos Equis beer, the whole idea is a fanciful description of the “world’s most interesting man” and the beer he happens to drink (*when* he drinks beer). This is one of the scripts (sweetened with my fave lines from other spots in the series). The campaign won the big \$100k prize at the Mercury Radio Awards and you can hear it there along with some other great radio.

SUBDUED ANNOUNCER: He once shot a bear, nursed it back to health, then shot it again. The police often question him just because they find him interesting. He once parallel-parked a train. He can speak French in Russian. He is the only man to ever ace a Rorschach Test. When it is raining, it is because he is thinking about something sad. He is...the Most Interesting Man in the World.

THE MAN: I don’t always drink beer, but when I do, I prefer Dos Equis. Stay thirsty, my friends.

These two concepts can be summed up in a sentence and they’re funny just as ideas. Imagine what happens when you can take your funny idea, expand it to a 60, and then record and produce it. Things get very cool.

There are lots of places online to listen to these and other award-winning spots. I’d start with the Radio Mercury Awards. I’ve also included a few here on heywhipple.com.

Singles versus campaigns.

Radio is one of the few media where I don’t feel bound by any particular campaign structure. Plenty of great radio campaigns out there have a campaign architecture (I’m thinking Bud Light or Motel 6). And if you’ve stumbled upon a format or a platform that’s yielding great spots one after another, by all means, stick with it. But if such a platform eludes you, there is no dishonor to you or loss to your client if you end up creating simply a string of great radio spots—as long as the spots report to the same strategy and as long as they’re great ideas.

See, I think radio is different from other media. A radio spot exists only as long as it’s playing. (Okay, so does TV. Pipe down; I’m on a roll here.) And unlike TV or print, there’s no visual graphic standards to worry about. So, whenever I sit down to do radio, I allow myself at least the *option* of attacking the brief one spot at a time. If I happen to hit on a single spot that has a repeatable format, of *course* I’ll go with a campaign. But if I don’t, there’s nothing wrong with simply coming up with the funniest or coolest, most interesting spots I can. The thing is, if you’re diligently writing to one brief, your spots will likely all add up to one brand. No matter how different the structures of the spots or the sound of their voice-overs, if the commercials are written to one thought, the listener will take away one thought.

It’s likely what you just read is a minority opinion. All I can tell you is this: in all my 33 years as a working writer in the agency business, my all-time favorite work was a radio campaign I did for Dunwoody Technical Institute, a small client in Minneapolis. It was a series of *wildly* dissimilar spots all based on one brief that holds together quite well...in this writer’s opinion. I’ve posted some of them here at heywhipple.com so you can decide for yourself.

As long as we're on the subject, I think it's important to point out here that the client at Dunwoody (I'm sorry, I don't remember his name) was fantastic. It was possibly the only campaign I ever worked on where the client did not change one *word* of the copy. This was at Fallon, in the '90s, and one of the things that made the shop great back then was the trust put in the creative department. There was no phalanx of account people or strategists in the studio when I recorded them. Just me and a great audio engineer, Andre Bergeron.

Find your voice.

Imagine how a novelist's fingers must start to fly over the keys after discovering and defining the main character. Finding your voice in radio can be just as liberating.

Think about who your character is. What's his take on your client's product or on the category? Is he thoughtful or sarcastic? Cynical or wry? Once you find this voice, you will see the material unfold before you, see all the possibilities for future executions, and your pen will start to move. Some of the best radio out there is just one voice reading 10 sentences. But it's that attitude in the voice, its take on the material, that makes it so compelling.

Figure out the right tone for your commercial.

I can assure you humor is the first fork in the road taken by every copywriter in the nation on every radio job they get. I don't blame them. It's fun to laugh, and the medium of radio just seems to beg for it.

But before you rush to the keyboard to start being funny, figure out what you want your listeners to feel. What do you want them to do? This is a decision you should make early in the process, and it should be based partly on your product, partly on what the competition is doing, and partly on what you know about the customer. Once you get a feeling for the general tone your finished commercials should have, avenues will begin to open up for you.

I can hear some of you saying, "Oh, come on! This isn't Shakespeare. I've got a car client and they need a spot for their spring sale. It's gotta be humor!" I agree. Humor sounds perfect for that. All I'm saying is, think it through. There may be approaches other than humor that are not only more effective but cooler as well.

Two more reasons not to be funny.

Hey, what if *you* aren't funny? It's possible to be a really good writer and still not be particularly adept at comedic dialog. I'm just sayin'. Here's another reason. What if your product or service doesn't call for a funny treatment?

Don't get me wrong. I'm not against comedy. But I am against assuming all radio spots should be funny. They don't. They need to be *interesting*.

Okay. Okay. If you're gonna be funny, at least avoid these comedic clichés.

My friend Clay Hudson is a terrific writer at GSD&M and particularly good at radio. A couple of years back, he came home from judging the radio for the One Show and sent me this e-mail: “Everything I heard was pretty good. But as I listened to all of it what kept going through my head was, ‘Heard it, heard it, heard it.’ There were so many tired, overused formats in radio I found myself waiting for something really different.”

Clay concluded his e-mail with a list of tired clichés to avoid, which I pass on to you, word for word.

- Spots that start with, “I’m here at...”

- Fake game shows

- Fake call-in shows

- Fake newscasts

- Bleeping out the dirty words to show how *edgy* you are

- Using the NFL Films voice-over guy

- Way over-the-top, abrasive, cartoon voices

- Spots that start off all warm and fuzzy and then turn out to be for something—wait for it—totally *edgy*!!!

- Spots where there’s no idea, just 15-word hyphenated phrases full of equestrian-jock-itch-monkey-pimples to show us they can write weird crap even if they don’t have an idea

- Voices that age or get younger during the spot

- Neanderthal spots that border on misogyny because they’re for “guys”

- Soap opera parodies (organ music and bad actors playing bad actors)

- Movie ad parodies (“In a world where...”)

- And parodies. Did I mention parodies?

Funny isn’t enough. You must have an idea.

Should you do something humorous, don’t mistake a good joke for a good idea. Funny is fine. But set out to be interesting first. You must have an idea.

Here’s an example of an interesting premise written by my friend, the late Craig Weise.

ANNOUNCER: Recently, Jim Paul of Valley Olds-Pontiac-GMC was driving to work when...(Man: “Gee, look at that.”)...he noticed a large inflatable gorilla floating above another dealership. He’d noticed several of these inflatable devices floating above car dealerships lately and he asked himself some questions. Did anybody ever go into that dealership and say, “Great gorilla. Makes me feel like buying a car.” Why don’t other businesses use gorillas? Would people be more likely to buy, say, a new home with a gorilla tethered to the chimney? “Three bedrooms, two-and-a-half baths, sun porch...gorilla.” Would people have more confidence in the

doctors if a medical clinic featured a gorilla on the roof? Without car dealers, would there even be an inflatable gorilla business? Right then, Jim Paul made an important, courageous decision on behalf of his fine dealership. (Man: "I don't think I'll get a gorilla.") Just eight miles south of the Met Center on Cedar Avenue, Jim Paul's Valley Olds-Pontiac-GMC. A car dealership for the times.

Over lunch one day, Craig pointed out there are no gags in this spot, no goofy-sounding voice-over. Just a guy reading about 160 words. And although radio is often described as a visual medium, Craig called this an example of radio as print. I think he's right. This commercial is simply an essay. Yet I think it's an incredibly funny spot. So did a lot of listeners. This commercial made a bunch of money for Mr. Paul's car dealership.

Make sure your radio spot is important, scary, funny, or interesting within the first five seconds.

Your spot just interrupted your listener's music. It's like interrupting people having sex. If you're going to lean in the bedroom door to say anything, you better make it good: "Hey, your car's on fire."

If your spot's not interrupting music, it's probably following on the heels of a bad commercial. Your listener is already bored. There's no reason for him to believe your commercial's going to be any better. Not a good time to bet on a slow build.

Also, awards show judges, like most regular folks out there, are fairly harsh. They'll grumble "fast-forward" in about five seconds if your spot isn't striking their fancy.

The following spot has an interesting opening line. (I include it for more reasons than just the setup: it's a simple premise, 130 words long, with no sound effects, and it entertains the whole way through.) It's a British spot, and it may help to hear it read with a droll English accent.

MALE VOICE-OVER: My life. By an ordinary HP grade battery.

Monday. Bought by the Snoads of Jackson Road, Balham. Placed in their flashlight. At last. A *career*.

Tuesday. How can I describe the cupboard under the stairs? After much thought, I've come up with..."dark."

Wednesday. The Snoad's hamster goes walkabout. After nearly five hours of continuous blazing torchlight, we track it down on Clapham Common.

Thursday. Oh *dear*. I'm dead. They swapped me for Duracell. It can power a torch nonstop for 39 hours. Which is nearly a full eight hamsters.

Friday. How can I describe the garbage can? After much thought, I've come up with..."rank." Still, I've led an interesting life. It's just been a bit...short.

ANNOUNCER 2: Duracell. No ordinary battery looks like it. Or lasts like it.

Find a way to quickly set up your scene.

You want your listener to immediately get what's going on, and your first five seconds is the place to make sure this happens. If your idea is a vignette of, say, a restaurant patron talking to a waitress, use that first five seconds to give your listener the cues needed in order to see this restaurant in his or her head. Maybe we hear plates being stacked and then a waitress says, "I'm sorry, we're about to close." If you leave your listener to figure it out, in my experience, the listener is more likely to tune you out than figure you out.

Write radio sparely.

Unless your concept demands a lot of words, write sparely. This allows your voice talent to read your script slowly. Quietly. One word at a time.

You'll be surprised at how this kind of bare-bones execution leaps out of the radio. There is a remarkable power in silence. It is to radio what white space is to print. Silence enlarges the idea it surrounds.

But even if your idea isn't a bare-bones kind of idea, write sparely. There's nothing worse than showing up at the studio with a fat script. You'll be forced to edit under pressure and probably without client approval.

Another safeguard you can use against overwriting is to get the mandatories done and timed out first. For instance, if your bank commercial has to end with a bunch of legal mumbo jumbo, write it as sparely as you can and then time it. What you have left over is for your idea.

Overwriting is the most common mistake people make in radio, especially juniors. Be a genius. Underwrite.

Time your script.

Read it slowly while you do. Sometimes I'll find myself cheating the clock in order to convince myself there's time to include a favorite bit. I'll read it fast but pretend I'm reading it slowly. I know, pathetic, but it happens. Read your script s-l-o-w-l-y.

If a 60-second spot is a house, a :30 is a tent.

A :30 is a different animal. If you think you're writing sparely for a 60-second commercial, for a :30 we're talking maybe 60 words. A :30 calls for a different brand of thinking. It's a lot like writing a 10-second TV spot. If your :30 is to be a funny spot, the comedy has to be fast. A quick pie in the face.

Here's an example of a very simple premise that rolls itself out very quickly.

ANNOUNCER: We're here on the street getting consumer reaction to the leading brand of dog food.

VARIOUS VOICES ON THE STREET: Yelllllchh! Aaaaarrrrgh! Gross! This tastes awful! ANNOUNCER: If you're presently a buyer of this brand, may we suggest Tuffy's dry dog food. Tuffy's is nutritionally

complete and balanced and it has a taste your dog will love. And at a dollar less per bag, it comes with a price you can swallow.

VARIOUS VOICES ON THE STREET: Yellllch! Aaaarrrrrgh!

ANNOUNCER: Tuffy's dry dog food. One other thing to keep in mind: most radio spots are promotional in nature, and many clients will have different promotional tags they'll want to add on at the end. This, too, cuts into your total time. So remember, time out the mandatories and then write sparsely for the time left.

If you're doing a dialogue, do it extremely well.

Write it exactly as people actually speak. This can be tough.

One of the problems you face with dialogue is weaving a sales message into the natural flow of conversation. (*"Can I have another one of those Flavor-rific brownies, Mom, now with one-third larger chocolate bits?"*) Always hard. Better to let a straight voice-over do the heavy lifting. Remember also that real people often speak in sentence fragments. Little bits of talk. That start, but go nowhere. Then restart. Note also that two people will often step on each other's lines or complete each other's thoughts.

Remember, just as the eye isn't fooled by cheap special effects, the ear picks up even slight divergences from real speech. Be careful with dialogue. Encouraging your voice-over talent to ad-lib where it feels natural may be a good way to help get to an authentic sound.

This next spot is a good example of dialogue and a personal favorite, a spot called "Shower" by Aaron Allen of Black Rocket—very funny. Listen to how much it sounds like actual speech.

SFX: Shower.

MAN: (from the living room) Hey, honey?

WOMAN: (Speaking a little loud, over the running water of her shower) Hi, sweetie.

MAN: Were you doing something to the lawn?

WOMAN: Yeah, I put in a sprinkler system.

(Pause.)

MAN: What?

WOMAN: I put in a sprinkler system.

MAN: When did you do that?

WOMAN: Today.

MAN: But how di...*really*?

WOMAN: Yep.

MAN: I would've done that.

WOMAN: Oh, that's okay. It was kind of fun.

MAN: Does it work?

WOMAN: What?

MAN: Nothing. (*Pause.*) You know those trenches have to be at least 10 inches deep or the pipes will freeze.

WOMAN: Yeah, I know. They're seventeen.

(*Long pause.*)

MAN: Don't use my conditioner, okay?

WOMAN: I'm not.

ANNOUNCER: Tools. Materials. Advice. Sanity. Our House-dot-com. We're here to help. Partnered with Ace.

Read your radio out loud.

You'll hear things to improve that you won't pick up just by scanning the script. The written and spoken word are different. Make sure your writing sounds like everyday speech. Read it aloud.

Avoid the formula of "shtick—serious sales part—shtick reprise."

You've heard them. The spots begin with some comic situation tangentially related to the product benefit. Then, about 40 seconds into the spot, an announcer comes in to "get serious" and sell you something. After which there's a happy little visit back to the joke.

One of the problems with this structure is that ungraceful moment when the salesperson pops out of the closet, wearing his infamous plaid jacket. This sandwich structure of shtick/sales pitch/shtick can work, but you risk hurting your listener's neck when you yank the wheel to the left to switch over to sales mode.

Personally, I think it's better to construct a comic situation you don't have to *leave* in order to come around to the sale. Remember our earlier metaphor of the dog and the pill? How it's best to wrap the bologna all around the pill? Well, it's especially true here. Here's "No Kenny G," a fantastic example of the product being completely embedded into the premise.

ANNOUNCER VO: Your attention please. Kenny G will not be appearing at this year's Kansas City Blues and Jazz Festival...even though Kenny G was never *scheduled* to appear at this year's Kansas City Blues and Jazz Festival, we want to make it absolutely clear that Kenny G would not be appearing at the Kansas City Blues and Jazz Festival even if Kenny G *underwrote* the entire cost of the event (although he is certainly welcome to do that). Frankly, if every blues and/or jazz musician on the face of the earth were to mysteriously vanish...Kenny G would *still* not be appearing at this year's Kansas City Blues and Jazz Festival. But, you ask, what if Kenny G were to somehow seize control of the military? Under this scenario, Kenny G would still not appear with Ramsey Lewis, Arturo Sandavol, and nearly 50 other authentic blues and jazz greats at this year's Kansas City Blues and Jazz Festival. Finally, on a personal note, if you are Kenny G, under no circumstance will you be appearing at the 11th Annual Kansas City Blues and Jazz Festival

July 20th through the 22nd at Penn Valley Park. For tickets, call 1-800-xxx-xxxx.

Here's another example of what I mean when I say bake your sales idea right into the concept.

(Note that this spot was recorded all in one continuous single take—breaths, ambient noise, warts, and all. The read begins at a natural pace and builds. Listen to the real thing if you can.)

KID: Tobacco companies make a product that's responsible for one death every eight seconds. Which means another person will probably die in the time it takes me to tell you that tobacco companies make a product that's responsible for about one death every eight seconds. And that means another person probably just died while I was telling you that another person will probably die in the time it takes me to tell you that tobacco companies make a product that's responsible for about one death every eight seconds. And that would also mean that about two people probably just died in the time it took me to tell you that another person probably died while I was telling you that another person probably died in the time it takes me to tell you that tobacco companies make a product that's responsible for about one death every eight seconds. And you know what? Another two people probably just died in the time it took me to tell you that about two people probably died in the time it took me to tell you that another person probably died while I was telling you that another person will probably die in the time it takes me to tell you that tobacco companies make a product that's responsible for about one death every eight seconds. And that means that during this commercial somewhere in the world, tobacco companies' products killed about eight people. This message brought to you by truth®.

Make your spot entertaining all the way to the end, particularly when you get to the sell.

I've heard many radio spots that start out great, but when they get to the selling message, they sputter out and fail. You can't just write off the sell as "the announcer stuff." It is part and parcel of the spot. It's the hardest part to make palatable but also the most important.

A humorous radio spot is like a good stand-up comedy routine. You need to open funny and end funny. And in the middle, you need to pulse the funny bits, to keep 'em coming. Do a funny line and then allow some breathing room, another funny bit, then more mortar, then another brick, more mortar, brick, mortar. Actually, such a structure can serve a commercial of any tone—every couple of feet, keep reeling out something *interesting*.

This commercial from BBDO West sells all the way through. But the way it's written, you are entertained all the way along. It's just one guy, a very straight-laced voice-over reading 189 words without a trace of irony.

ANNOUNCER: Fire ants are not lovable. People do not want fire-ant plush toys. They aren't cuddly. They don't do little tricks. They just bite you and leave red, stinging welts that make you want to cry.

That's why they have to die. And they have to die right now. You don't want them to have a long, lingering illness. You want death. A quick, excruciating, see-you-in-hell kind of death. You don't want to lug a bag of chemicals and a garden hose around the yard. It takes too long. And baits can take up to a week. No, my friend, what you want is Ant-Stop Orthene Fire Ant Killer from Ortho. You put two teaspoons of Ant-Stop around the mound and you're done. You don't even water it in. The scout ants bring it back into the mound. And this is the really good part. Everybody dies. Even the queen. It's that fast. And that's good. Because killing fire ants shouldn't be a full-time job. Even if it is pretty fun. Ant-Stop Orthene Fire-Ant Killer from Ortho. Kick fire-ant butt.³

Once you get an idea, write the entire spot before you decide it doesn't work.

After you've identified a few workable ideas, write them. Tell your internal editor to put a sock in it. Just get that raw material on paper. You may find that in the writing, you fix what was bothering you about the commercial.

Avoid the temptation to use any sort of brand name or other copyrighted material.

As an example, I once wrote a script where I referred to the Beatles. They weren't the focus of the spot; their name was used in an offhand sort of aside. The spot was approved, but one week before we recorded the script, the lawyers landed on it like a ton of hair spray and tasseled loafers. When I tried to rewrite it, days after the original heat of the creative moment had cooled, I found myself unable to replace the line without the repair marks showing.

Lesson: Don't touch copyrighted stuff. Famous people, brand names, even dead guys who've been taking a dirt nap for 50 years—their lawyers are all still alive and slithering about, full of grim reptilian vigor. Stay generic.

Don't do jingles.

Do I have to say this? Jingles are a boring, corny, horrible, and sad thing left over from Eisenhower's 1950s—a time, actually, when *everything* was boring, corny, horrible, and sad. Avoid jingles as you would a poisonous toad. They are death.

³ Tom Monahan, *Communication Arts* (July 1994), 198.

THE JOY OF SFX

A sound effect can lead to a concept.

It's an interesting place to start. Find a sound that has something to do with your product or category and play with it. Here's an example of a sound effect set inside a good comic premise and used to great effect.

SFX: Telephone ring.

MAN: Hello.

CALLER: Oh. I'm sorry. I was looking for another number.

MAN: 976-EDEN?

CALLER: Well...yeah.

MAN: You got it.

CALLER: The flyer said to ask for Eve.

MAN: Yeah, well she's not here. I can help you.

CALLER: Oh...no. That's okay, I'll just...

MAN: Hold on, hold on. Let me get the apple.

CALLER: The apple?

MAN: You ready? Here goes...

SFX: Big juicy crunch of an apple.

CALLER: That's...you're eating an apple. That's the "little bit of paradise" you advertised?

MAN: Well, that's a "little bite of paradise." The printer made a mistake.

CALLER: I'm supposed to sit here and listen to you eat an apple?

MAN: Well, it is a Washington apple.

SFX: Crunch.

CALLER: Look, I'm not going to pay three dollars a minute just to sit here while you...

MAN: Nice, big, Red Delicious Washington apple.

SFX: Crunch.

CALLER:...eat an apple.... It does sound good.

MAN: It's nice and crisp, you know.

CALLER: Sounds good.

MAN: Kinda sweet.

CALLER: Uh-huh.

MAN: Fresh.

CALLER: I shouldn't...this is silly...

SFX: Crunch.

CALLER: What are you wearing?

MAN: Well, a flannel shirt and a paisley ascot.

CALLER: Oh. Describe the apple again.

MAN: Mmmmm-hmmmm.

ANNOUNCER: Washington apple.

SFX: Crunch.

ANNOUNCER: They're as good as you've heard.

You can also base a spot on a sound effect that doesn't even exist. To arrive at this next idea for the technical school I mentioned earlier—Dunwoody—I started by thinking about what sound communicated a feeling of isolation and sadness. I settled on the classic sound effect of a cricket, which I thought ably represented the loneliness of a jobless college graduate living in his parents' basement waiting by the phone for a job offer that may never come. Once I completed the script, the fun part was messing around at the controls with the engineer, Andre, trying to morph the sound of a cricket into the sound of a ringing phone and then into a hallucination. It was fun. (You can hear this spot here on heywhipple.com.)

MALE VOICE-OVER: After graduation, as you sit in your parents' basement waiting for the phone to ring with job offers that will never come, you'll begin to hear them. The crickets.

SFX: Crickets.

VOICE-OVER: That lonely sound. The theme song of the disenfranchised. Sometimes you think you hear the phone ringing, with a job offer.

SFX: Telephone ring, which then becomes crickets again.

VOICE-OVER: But it's just them—the crickets. Soon you start to hear what they're really saying.

SFX: Cricket sound morphs into a teasing, high-pitched, vibrating voice that says, "Loooooser. Loooooser."

VOICE-OVER: Now's probably not a good time to hear about the graduates of Dunwoody Institute.

SFX: A few regular cricket chirps, then a few saying "Loooooser."

VOICE-OVER: How there's an average of four job offers waiting for every Dunwoody graduate. No, you're going to hold out. For a call that will never come.

SFX: Actual real phone, ringing loud. Phone is picked up.

GUY: Hello????

SFX: Cricket, heard through phone speaker, says, "Loooooser." Laughs and hangs up.... One last little cricket chirp.

VOICE-OVER: Call Dunwoody Institute and get training in one of 16 interesting careers. Call 374-5800. 374-5800.

Radio is where you can think of six impossible things before breakfast and then actually do them.

Don't overdo sound effects.

Sound effects can be great tools for radio. They can help tell a story. They can be the story. But don't overuse them or expect them to do things they can't.

Since 90 percent of radio listening is done in the car (to and from work, during what media buyers call *drive time*), teeny subtleties are going to be lost. The buttoning of a shirt does indeed make a sound, but it probably isn't enough to communicate somebody getting dressed.

My friend, the famous Mike Lescarbeau, says that any day now he expects a client to ask him to open a radio spot with "the sound effect of somebody getting a great value."

Don't waste time explaining things.

Screenwriter William Goldman advised, "Cut into a scene as late as you possibly can." Good advice. Crisp self-editing like this keeps your story moving along with a minimum of moving parts. His advice has a classical precedent.

Cut right to the important part of a scene. For instance, in your radio spot, we hear the sound effect of a knock at the door. Does the next line really have to be "Hey, someone's at the door"? Probably not. Let the sound effects tell your story for you. People are smart. They'll fill in the blanks if you provide the structure.

Avoid cacophony.

You might as well learn now that you can't put sirens in a radio spot. At least not in my market, and I can see why. It confuses drivers. They hear a siren sound effect on their radio and pull over to let an ice cream truck pass by.

While we're on the subject of irritating noises, keep any kind of cacophony out of your spot. That includes yelling—even "comedic" yelling. It grates on the listener. Especially on the third and fourth airing.

I've always thought of radio as the best medium to target carpenters. These guys have their radios on all day. They're not just going to hear your spot; they're going to hear the entire radio buy. One carpenter told me he actually changes stations to avoid hearing an irritating spot played over and over again.

Keep carpenters in mind when you write. Remember, these guys have hammers. (And power saws.) (And nail guns.) (And chisels.) (And wire cutters.)

CASTING: BORING, TEDIOUS, ESSENTIAL

Cast and cast and cast.

Casting is everything. In radio, the voice-over you choose is the star, the wardrobe, the set design, everything all rolled into one. It's the most important decision you make during production.

Start casting as soon as possible. Your producer will likely send the script to a number of great casting houses around the country. I strongly suggest two of those cities be Los Angeles and New York. Along with the scripts, send your casting specs: some description of the quality of voice you have in mind.

About a week later, the auditions will turn up, usually via a link on the Internet. Listen to all of them (at the agencies I worked at, 60 to 100 auditions for one voiceover was normal). Make your selections and then make a short list of the best voices back-to-back so you can zero in on those nuances that make a real difference.

Your final short list should be your top three. You'll also have a second and third choice to return to if your client has a problem with the one you recommend.

One last note: Consider using the voice of just "some guy"—a friend, the babysitter, or somebody in the media department. A modicum of talent is necessary, but it can work and the resulting spots sound fresh and different.

Cast people who have some edge to them.

Spielberg is alleged to have responded to the question, "What is the key to making great movies?" with "Eccentric casting."

This is good advice. Most of the auditions you'll be listening to during casting are going to be vanilla. That's because you're hearing a lot of highly skilled voice people doing reads they think will get them to the short list. They'll be taking their edges off, moving toward the middle, and goin' all white-bread on you.

Listen for authenticity. Listen for grit. Don't listen for a great voice talent who will read your fake script for money. Listen for real.

As you listen to the casting, keep an open mind about the voice you're looking for.

You may discover someone who brings a whole new approach to your script. Sometimes it comes from an ad-lib or from an actor who doesn't understand the soul of the spot. These fresh approaches to your material may open up new possibilities for how you might produce the final commercial.

Rewrite based on what you learn from the casting.

You'll have one last chance to make your radio spot better. When you're listening to the auditions on the casting site, keep an ear cocked for those sentences where the actors stumble.

If more than one actor has a problem with a line, it's likely the line that's the problem, not the actors.

I usually discover if I have a dialogue, one or two of the lines I have given the actors are too long. The dialogue is flowing along and suddenly it's a monologue. So as you go through the auditions, listen to the general flow. Is it entertaining in the first 10 seconds? In the second 10? The last? Are you saying the same thing twice? Are you saying the same thing twice? If you can take something out, do it now. It's your last chance to make a change and have the client sign off before you go into the studio.

Sometimes the best way to present a spot is to do a demo.

Ask your producer if there's a couple hundred in the budget you could use for this purpose. If your spot depends on the unique presentation of a particular actor's voice, this may be the way to go.

PRODUCING A RADIO COMMERCIAL

Production is where 90 percent of all radio spots fail.

For some reason I don't quite get, radio is an all-or-nothing medium. It works or it doesn't. There is no in between. I urge you to learn how and learn well all the elements of production.

Copywriter Tom Monahan on radio:

In radio, there's simply no place to hide anything. No place for the mistakes, the poor judgment, the weaknesses. Everything is right there in front for all 30 or 60 seconds. Everything must be good for the spot to be good. The concept, copy, casting, acting, production—everything. One of them goes wrong, sorry, but it's tune-out time.³

So, start with a good idea. Craft it into a great script. Congratulations, you are 10 percent of the way there.

Let your producer in on your idea.

It'll pay to take a moment to go over the soul of your radio ideas with your producer. Your producer needs to get a good feeling for the kind of read you're looking for, for the kind of voice, for the whole tone of the spot. Let your producer in on all the nuance. When you do, the whole production can go up several levels.

Develop a good working relationship with a local audio engineer.

My friend, copywriter Phil Hanft, reminded me of the importance of finding a good recording engineer in your town—a technician with a great ear who will add to the process. One who understands timing and the importance of the right sound effects and the right music. Not someone who wants to get you in and out as fast as possible or someone who agrees with every idea you have. As William Wrigley Jr. said, “When two people in business always agree, one of them is unnecessary.”

Keep the studio entourage to a minimum.

Try to produce your spot alone. Well, just you and the engineer, I mean. No clients. No account executives. Not that they're bad people and you, you *alone*, are a Radio God. It's just that large crowds bring tension into those small rooms. Your spot will have more focus if it isn't produced by a committee of six.

Provide your talent with scripts that are easy to read.

Set the type in something like 14 point and double-space it so there's room for the talent to scribble in any coaching advice or last-minute changes.

Don't worry about proper punctuation. Write for the flow of speech. And underline or italicize words you know you want the voice-over to hit. But don't OVERdo it *your final* read IS to STINK.

Also, come to the session prepared to cut certain lines in the event your script runs long. Know in advance what to cut, or you'll find yourself rewriting under pressure at the studio. Not good.

When you're in the recording studio, tell the voice-over to read it straight.

Most of them have been trained by years of copywriters telling them to “put a smile in your voice” or hit the word *tomorrow* in the line “So come on in *to-morrow*.” People don't talk like that. Have your voice-over talk like you talk. I find a flat read is almost always best. (Those seven words are probably the most important ones in this chapter.) A flat read is almost always best.

Don't start directing talent from the get-go.

For the first few takes, let the talent read it the way they want. Some of them are very experienced. If your script is great, they may pick up on what you want right at the outset. If they don't, fine; you've involved the talent up front and now you have a baseline from which to work.

Also, don't wear out your talent by making them start from the top for every take. If you've got a good opening on tape, do what's called a *pickup* and start the read further into the script. Then do a quick edit to see if it cuts together. It usually does.

Don't let the talent steamroll you.

If you're a young writer on your first studio session, let your engineer in on this fact, but not the talent. The engineer, if he's a good soul, will show you the ropes and teach what you need to know. But if the voice-over catches a whiff and figures out there's "junior meat" in the studio, they'll take over the session, particularly if you're working with some of the higher-priced Hollywood or New York talent. Don't let it happen.

TV shoots are controlled by the director. Radio, by the writer. Stay in charge of the room. Give and take is fine, but ultimately you're the one who has to show up back at the agency with a spot. If you're new to the business, ask a senior writer if you can observe a few recording sessions before you tackle one alone. Your producer can give you some good advice as well.

Don't be afraid to stray from the script.

It's just the architecture. Get the client-approved script in the can, but if something else seems to be working, explore it. Record those other ideas and come back to experiment with them later. Maybe you'll beat the original idea.

Don't overproduce.

I've seen it happen a million times. You get into that tiny room with all the knobs and buttons. You drink too much coffee. You start messing with the "s" on the end of the word *prices*, borrowing the "s" from take 17 and putting it on *price* from 22. You start taking a breath out here and adding it there. By the time you're done, you have a slick, surgically perfect piece of rubbish that sounds as natural as Michael Jackson.

When painting a picture, never put your nose closer than two inches to the canvas.

If your client can afford it, always produce one more radio spot than you need.

It's the darnedest thing, but the script you thought was the hilarious one turns out to be the least funny. It happens every time I go into the studio. One or two spots are simply going to be better than the others. The more you have to choose from, the better.

One way to get a few more spots out of the session is to record your alternate scripts at what they call *demo* rates and then upgrade the talent (pay the full rate) if the client approves the commercials for air.

RADIO SPOTS THAT WERE FUNNY BEFORE THEY WERE RECORDED

"Ba-Donk-a-donk" for Subway restaurants.

GIRL CASHIER: (*Heard through tinny speaker*) Welcome to Burger Bonanza, may I take your order?

GUY: Yeah, I'd like an extra large Pot Belly.

CASHIER: You want just the Pot Belly, or the combo?

GUY: I'lllll...go with the combo.

CASHIER: And what would you like for your side?

GUY: Ummmmm...do you have Love Handles?

CASHIER: Yep, two to an order.

GUY: Yeah, I'll have two of those and, oh, a Double Chin as well. (Laughs) I *love* those things. Honey? What do you want?

WOMAN: Can I get a Badonkadonk Butt?

CASHIER: You want the Badonkadonk Butt or the Ba-*DONK*-adonk Butt?

WOMAN: Umm, just the Badonkadonk.

CASHIER: Okay, but you can get Extra Flabby for only 49¢ more.

WOMAN: Um, sure. Oh, and what kind of thighs do you have?

CASHIER: We have Thunder Thighs and Cottage Cheese Thighs.

WOMAN: How about the Thunder Thighs?

CASHIER: Sure. So that's one Extra Large Pot Belly Combo with a side of Love Handles, a Double Chin and an Extra Flabby Badonkadonk Butt with Thunder Thighs on the side.

ANNCR: What are you really getting with your combo meal? Try Subway restaurant's new California Fit menu options, with raisins, apple slices, and low-fat milk. A tasty, nutritious alternative to burgers and fries. Subway. Eat Fresh.

“My Second Teeny Head” for Skittles.

MAN 1: One Skittles for you.

MAN 2: Thank you.

MAN 1: One skittles for me. And one for the tiny head on my shoulder.

TEENY VOICE: Thank you, sir.

MAN 2: (Protesting) Just because you have two heads doesn't mean you get double the Skittles. We both have one stomach to feed.

TEENY VOICE: Every time with this guy.

MAN 1: No, no, he makes a fair point. All in favor of giving Skittles to both me and my second tiny head say “aye.”

MAN 1 AND TINY VOICE IN UNISON: “Aye.”

MAN 1: All opposed?

MAN 2: (Dejected) Naaay.

TEENY VOICE: Two to one, suckerrrrr.

ANNOUNCER: Split the Rainbow. Taste the Rainbow.

“Monkey Juice” for VW Jetta GLI.

SFX: (Ring of phone, picked up.)

GUY: (We hear his voice through the phone. He seems distracted and distant throughout spot) Yeah.

WOMAN: Hey baby. GUY: Hey.

WOMAN: So, how's your day going?

GUY: (Clearly the guy is in the zone and is not really hearing anything the woman is saying.) Um, good.

WOMAN: How did that meeting go?

GUY: Hah, yeah, ...wow.

WOMAN: You're driving your Jetta right now, aren't you?

GUY: That's great. WOMAN: Ya know, monkey juice is delicious if you're wearing comfortable pants.

GUY: Yeah, I totally agree.

WOMAN: I'm having an affair with the plumber. He's here right now. You want to talk to him?

GUY: Oh well, what're you gonna do?

WOMAN: Um, can I borrow your Jetta tomorrow?

GUY: (Suddenly very alert and very attentive) Wh-what do you need it for???

ANNCR: The 200 hp VR6 engine, a six-speed manual transmission and 17-inch alloy wheels, Volkswagen Jetta GLI owners take

driving seriously. A little too seriously. Make sure to test drive the 200 hp Jetta GLI today.

“High-Speed Car Chase” for Nissan Leaf (Electric).

ANNOUNCER: [And now] a high-speed cop chase in a Nissan Leaf.

SFX: Car door slams.

GUY: Step on it, O’Connor. Those bastards are getting away.

COMPLETE SILENCE FOR 10 SECONDS

SFX: Brakes skid to a stop.

SFX: Handcuffs locking shut.

GUY: Good work partner, we got ‘im.

ANNOUNCER: The 100 percent silent, 100 percent electric Nissan Leaf.

Nissan. Innovation that excites.

“Directions to My Place” for VW Beetle Convertible.

SFX: (Office ambience in the background throughout.)

GUY: Got a pen? Alright, write this down. First, you’ll go through this, like, canopy of trees. And when you look up, you’ll notice that the moon goes away...and like reappears and goes away again... okay? At that point, right overhead you’ll see a streetlight right overhead with a blinking bulb in it. As soon as you see that, take a left. Then you go straight, straight, straight, you’ll pass this area that smells like Korean food, you’ll pass this bar that always has, like, live music coming from it? ‘Kay? Then hang a right when you see...I guess it’s like a gargoyle head on top of a hotel and...from there you should remember it. You pass under that footbridge with the aluminum bottom...annnd my apartment is up on the left. Didja get all that? See ya in a bit.

SFX: (Phone is hung up.)

MUSIC: (Comes up and under ANNCR.)

WOMAN ANNCR: With the new Beetle Convertible, you get the road, the sky, and everything in between. Experience it for yourself at your local Volkswagen dealer.