

A Sense of Place

Key Findings

- Public radio listeners feel a strong Sense of Place. In the high country of Flagstaff it is “Poverty with a View.” In family-friendly Minneapolis it is “Minnesota Nice.” Bostonians are proud to be living in “the Athens of America.” We found a different Sense of Place in each market.
- The dimensions of each place are mental, and the maps in the minds of public radio listeners do not match political geography. We found that dimensions of environment, history and culture are more important than standard boundaries like city, county and state.
- Despite differences of place, we found that public radio listeners who are drawn to news and information programming are the same from market to market. When they tune to public radio they are seeking depth, intelligence, authenticity, civility and a global perspective.
- Younger respondents explained that they had grown up with public radio in the household. We called them “NPR Babies.” When they tune to news and information on public radio they are seeking the same values as older listeners.
- Metro daily newspapers, which may have provided respectable coverage of their home markets in the past, have deteriorated both in quality and quantity of local coverage. The national and world news stories that do appear are picked up from syndication. Public radio listeners would rather go directly to the source by accessing Internet sites such as the Manchester Guardian, the New York Times or the BBC.
- Public radio listeners would value a station that covers their place with depth, intelligence and a wider perspective, just as NPR covers the nation and the world. But the actual performance of local news and information programming too often fails to deliver on its promise.
- We found that the problem with locally produced talk shows is not just the problem of quality control. The live call in talk format itself tends to alienate an important segment of our audience.

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- Local showcase programs too often fail to deliver—even on the selection of topics. Respondents used the term “hit or miss” to describe local showcase programs, even where the station had already invested substantial resources.
- Public radio listeners want more from local newscasts than the typical reading of headlines. They would rather have fewer stories, in relative depth, even within a cutaway newscast.
- Public radio listeners are working with their minds as they listen to local news and information. They are thinking about connections, other angles and a wider, even global perspective. There is no forgiveness of how the story is framed just because the station is local.
- If producers working at local stations more clearly understood the Sense of Place in the minds of their listeners, they could sharpen their editorial judgment. That understanding would help producers frame their stories beyond the merely local.
- But focusing on Sense of Place will not save local news and information programming that fails to deliver essential Core Values such as depth, intelligence, authenticity, civility and a wider, even global perspective.