A Station Manager's Role in PPM™ Encoding

While your engineer will be your station's resident expert on the 'nuts and bolts' of PPM encoding, station management staff should consider playing an active role in ensuring that the station remains encoded at all times. To that end, this document is being provided to General Managers, Operations Managers and Program Directors with important information regarding the relationship of encoding to audience estimates, the importance of self-monitoring and to serve some important food for thought.

Your Engineer and PPM Radio Ratings

The foundation of your station's PPM ratings is the information inserted into your station's signal by your PPM encoding equipment. When your encoder is bypassed, turned off, or not functioning as intended, your station is not eligible to receive any listening credit. As such, your engineer is no longer a "behind the scenes" associate when it comes to ratings—there is a direct relationship between your station's audience estimates and the continuing successful operation of your encoding equipment.

Quality of Service Testing

Following the installation of your station's encoding equipment, Arbitron works with your station engineer to test the equipment. Only after this testing is complete is your station eligible to be reported in the *Radio Market Report*/Arbitron eBook℠. While this testing is a critical element of PPM measurement, testing takes but a few minutes of your engineer's time. Arbitron recommends that you follow-up with your station engineer and verify that testing of your encoding equipment is complete.

Your Encoding Equipment

Your station's package of encoding equipment contains at least one primary encoder, backup encoder and encoding monitor (the total number of pieces of encoding gear sent to your station depends upon the complexity of your station's air chain and may be limited by the terms of your station's license agreement with Arbitron). Each piece of equipment has a role to play in station encoding; as such, an Arbitron broadcast engineer has worked with your station engineer to determine how best to install the equipment to make sure that all of your station's signal paths are encoded.

The Encoding Monitor—Why It's There, How It Works

Since it is not possible to verify that your station is encoding by listening to the station (PPM encoding is inaudible to the human ear), Arbitron provides each encoded station with an encoding monitor. Your station's encoding monitor is a device that is pre-programmed to listen for your station's encoding. Should your station's monitor not hear encoding in your station's signal, the monitor will notify your engineer that there may be a problem. The monitor can notify your engineer of a problem in three ways:

1. **LED indicator light on front of unit.** The monitor's LED is solid green when the station is encoded. During unencoded periods the LED is flashing red.

2. **PC Output.** The encoding monitor may be connected to a computer in order to provide a text log of encoding activity (software not provided by Arbitron).

3. **Alarm System Contact Closures.** The encoding monitor can be integrated into the alarm system that notifies your engineer of a critical systems failure.

Each encoded radio station is responsible for self-monitoring the station's encoding. As such, Arbitron *strongly* recommends that stations integrate the encoding monitor into the station's alarm/paging systems. Engineers that do so will be notified quickly of any potential problems or issues.

What Happens When the Monitor Identifies a Problem

Upon indication that there may be a problem with encoding, your engineer has been instructed to take action *immediately* to restore encoding. While this generally consists of switching to the pre-installed backup encoder and contacting Arbitron for replacement gear, resolution of a problem may be more complex. The complexity of the solution will

depend upon your station's signal path(s) and the manner in which the encoding equipment was installed. Regardless of the complexity, your station engineer should be able to diagnose and fix the problem quickly.

There is a Problem, and My Engineer is Not Around—Now What?

There are times when your engineer may not be available on-site to fix an encoding problem. Similarly, there may be times when your engineer is not as responsive to fixing the problem as quickly as you would like. In scenarios such as these, someone other than the station engineer may have to take action to restore encoding. To account for such possibilities, Arbitron recommends that station management actively work with station engineering staff to develop a contingency plan that non-engineers can deploy to restore encoding. Arbitron recommends including these key steps in your plan:

- Verify that your encoding monitor is installed, has been turned on and is fully integrated into the station's alarm systems.

- Communicate with your engineer and make sure there is a common understanding of the importance of PPM encoding, the relationship between an interruption in encoding and audience estimates and the necessity of timely action in the event of an encoding outage.

- Understand at a high level how your engineer has installed your station's PPM encoding equipment. Know the physical location(s) where the encoding equipment is installed, and where in the station's air chains the encoders have been installed.

- Develop and document a set of specific steps that non-technical station staff can take to switch to the station's backup encoder (or other engineer-recommended technical solution). Make sure these steps are posted near the encoding equipment.

- Train select staff members on the contingency plan's steps; and ensure that those responsible for the contingency plan have access—including keys, secure-cards, and permission—to enter the location housing the equipment.

- Program Arbitron's 24-Hour Encoding Hotline number into any phone which you may use while at the station. In the event of an outage, after switching to the backup encoder, it is essential the Arbitron broadcast engineer for the market be contacted.

Arbitron Audits

Arbitron does not systematically monitor any station's encoding. Arbitron may, however, audit the performance of its encoding equipment deployed in the field. Audit tools that Arbitron may use include analyses of audience estimates, unweighted data, empirical observation, etc. Should information be discovered during an encoder audit that appears to indicate an interruption in the station's encoding has occurred (or is still occurring), an Arbitron broadcast engineer may contact the station engineer to discuss. Such courtesy calls should not be thought of as a surrogate for self-monitoring; if there is an encoding outage, and Arbitron calls you, it's already too late—the damage to your station's estimates is done.

Too Much of a Good Thing

It is common for a station to install multiple sets of PPM encoding gear. While such installations are often recommended, mismanagement of multiple-encoder installations can negatively impact the station's estimates. From a ratings perspective, "too much encoding" is just as bad as an encoding outage. Were a station to be simultaneously encoded by more than one encoder, the station is likely to receive less credit than it should have. (The extent of the reduction in credit and impact to the station's estimates depends upon the nature and duration of the circumstance.)

As a matter of policy, Arbitron will not reissue any report due to simultaneous encoding. To avoid this circumstance, Arbitron recommends that station engineering staff work to develop a set of security procedures to help to ensure that only one encoder is encoding the station at any time. When developing these procedures, station engineers should be particularly mindful of conditions (such as facility maintenance) when switching between signal paths and/or transmitters may be necessary.

The Unauthorized Use of Encoding Equipment

Regardless of the measurement instrument used in a particular market, Arbitron takes very seriously any activities (either intentional or unintentional) that may have rating distortion potential. For encoding stations, the unauthorized use of encoding equipment may rise to the level of rating distortion. Arbitron has developed procedures to identify circumstances where encoding equipment is being used in an unauthorized fashion. While the authorized uses of encoding equipment have been discussed at length

with your station engineer, Arbitron encourages station management to discuss Arbitron's rating distortion policy with station engineering staff to ensure that all essential station associates are aware of avoiding activities with rating distortion potential.

The Bottom Line—Why Encoding Is Important

Audience estimates are not available for encoded stations during periods when the station was not encoded—the unencoded period is averaged into the station's estimates as a "zero." As Arbitron does not adjust audience estimates for unencoded intervals, any interruption in encoding has the potential to negatively impact your station's estimates. It is essential, therefore, that all stations make the proper installation and use of PPM encoding equipment, and the on-going self-monitoring of PPM encoding, a priority. By doing so, the encoded station maximizes the opportunity to have its encoded signal reach as many listeners as possible… including PPM Panelists that are tuned into the station.

For Additional Information

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PPM-09-04125