It was just about this time last year that the Rock 40 frenzy reached its apex. Having already demonstrated a knack for achieving out-of-the-box 12+ success in several key markets – most notably Kansas City (KXXR) and Detroit (WDFX) – the format received its biggest boost to date when KQLZ (Pirate)/Las Vegas scored an impressive outing.

Buoyed by Pirate’s success, more stations began experimenting with current-based rock formats. Many of the moves were radically different from one another. It was at that point that Joint Communications, which service-marked the term Rock 40 in 1987 but had yet to aggressively market its version of the format, began a concerted effort to lay claim to the name and prepare to capitalize on Rock 40’s increasing notoriety.

Twelve months later, Joint still has no Rock 40 clients. Meanwhile, virtually all the major market stations originally grouped under the Rock 40 umbrella have abandoned the approach. Pirate’s still doing its thing, but the ratings have slipped from their once lofty levels, and some say it’s only a matter of time before Scott Shannon and company steer the Pirate toward more mainstream CHR waters.

What does Joint Chairman Joe Sinton have to say about all this?

“Frankly, it still may be a little early for Rock 40 in some markets. But we’re just as bullish on the format as we were a year ago. When it’s done right – when it’s formatically pure – there’s a position for Rock 40 in the larger markets.

“You’re deluding yourself if you believe further fragmentation of 12-34 men is going away.” — Jon Sinton

Rock 40 vs. Rock CHR

It should be noted that what Joint calls Rock 40 (and what Burkhardt/Douglas & Associates calls “Male CHR,” a format currently working at WAZU/Daysen) is a far different format than the one employed by the failed Rock CHRs. “Our concept of Rock 40 is much closer to AOR than most of the attempts we’ve seen thus far,” says Sinton. “It’s silly to me to think that CHR is going to attract a lot of 18-34-year-old men. Musically, Rock 40 is an AOR format.

“I think what happens to stations that approach Rock 40 from a CHR perspective is that they look up and say, ‘God, we’re really going against the grain. It would sure be a lot easier to be a Dance CHR.’ There’s a natural push toward Dance CHR, as opposed to letting CHR fragment more toward the rock side.”

While Sinton remains “bullish” on Rock 40 formatics, he knows first-hand how difficult they are to market. “Lee Abrams and I compared notes on this a couple of weeks ago,” he says. “And we were laughing, because it’s just like AOR was in the mid-’70s. You know it’s out there, you know it’s viable, you know it gets ratings, but you haven’t found a way to talk GMs into it. You have two things working against you. One is the general bias against hard rock. Two is the general bias against anything that doesn’t promise the glorious 25-34 demo.

“Ultimately, what will happen is that as everyone goes for 25-34, at some point people will look up and say, ‘There must be some money out there for 18-34.’ It’s going to take a process of education on our part for the media-buying community, just as we had to reeducate them in the ’70s that all our listeners weren’t wearing black T-shirts and waiting for us to play music to kill your parents by. As you’ll recall, we had a lot of doubters and a number of failures back then.

“I have every confidence in the world in Rock 40’s viability. There’s an awful lot of groundwork that goes into something like this. Formats don’t become successful overnight. It was a number of years before people stopped talking about Classic Rock as a short-lived permutation of AOR. I don’t think it’s safe to bet on Rock 40 out at this point. The natural evolution of this medium is toward narrower and narrower targeting.”

“Boutique” Format?

Interestingly, Pollack Media Group has not marketed any Rock 40-type formats. “As with most boutique formats, we never got involved with it,” explains IMG President Tommy Hedges. “We’re not against experimentation, but ours is a conservative company and taking a gigantic twist in one direction is a tough sell in a highly competitive environment.”

Hedges says the CHR-based Rock 40 “got stuck between a rock and a hard place. They didn’t rock consistently enough to really compete with the broader male appeal of an AOR. Nor did they play enough nonrock product to appeal numbers simply couldn’t sell the format. The fragment of the audience that was being dominated wasn’t important enough to advertisers, who are still living in a 25-34 world. The niche they tried to fill was too small and too specific. Then there’s the problem with advertisers not wanting to be associated with certain sounds, much of the Rock 40 music suffered from the heavy metal stereotype.”

Like Hedges, Lee Abrams, whose version of Rock 40 is a little thing called Z-Rock, says the Rock CHRs “got caught in the middle. They were too wimpy for the real rockers and too hard for mainstream people. They wouldn’t go far enough. Males 18-24 just don’t want to hear a bunch of hard singles. It was a chicken version of hard rock. That’s what Rock CHRs were supposed to be — not hard rock, but they just didn’t want to go that far.”

“Two of our stations are both doing fine. Ultimately, the key will be demographics, and one of the beauties of the format is that it’s pretty much teen-less. It’s proved to be more of an 18-26 format.”

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Whatever Happened to the Edge?

Fred Jacobs is all too familiar with the problems of marketing a new format. As he noted in last week’s column, it took over two years to get Classic Rock on FM, and even longer before the format realized its true potential.

When brings us to the Edge, the New Rock format Jacobs introduced back in the summer of ’88. Two years later, the Edge has but two clients: WBRU/Providence and KGDE/Dallas, the latter an AM. What’s the damn deal?

“We really came out with the Edge earlier than we were prepared to market it,” Jacobs candidly admits. “Between AOR, Classic Rock, and the research we’re doing, we’ve got a lot of business to take care of, and the Edge has had to take a back seat. The fact that we elected not to market Rock 40 markets where we already have a client also limits us to a certain degree.

“I also undertook without marketing wall I might face. At least when it came to Classic Rock, the GMs knew all about the Beatles and the Stones. Try talking to them about the Cure and Depeche Mode.

“But I’m not at all discouraged by what’s happened. We just haven’t gotten our marketing in gear. The Edge isn’t even on the short list of formats yet. When the GM sits down and says, ‘We’ve got to change formats,’ the Edge doesn’t come to mind.”

“Our two stations are both doing fine. Ultimately, the key will be demographics, and one of the beauties of the format is that it’s pretty much teen-less. It’s proved to be more of an 18-26 format.”