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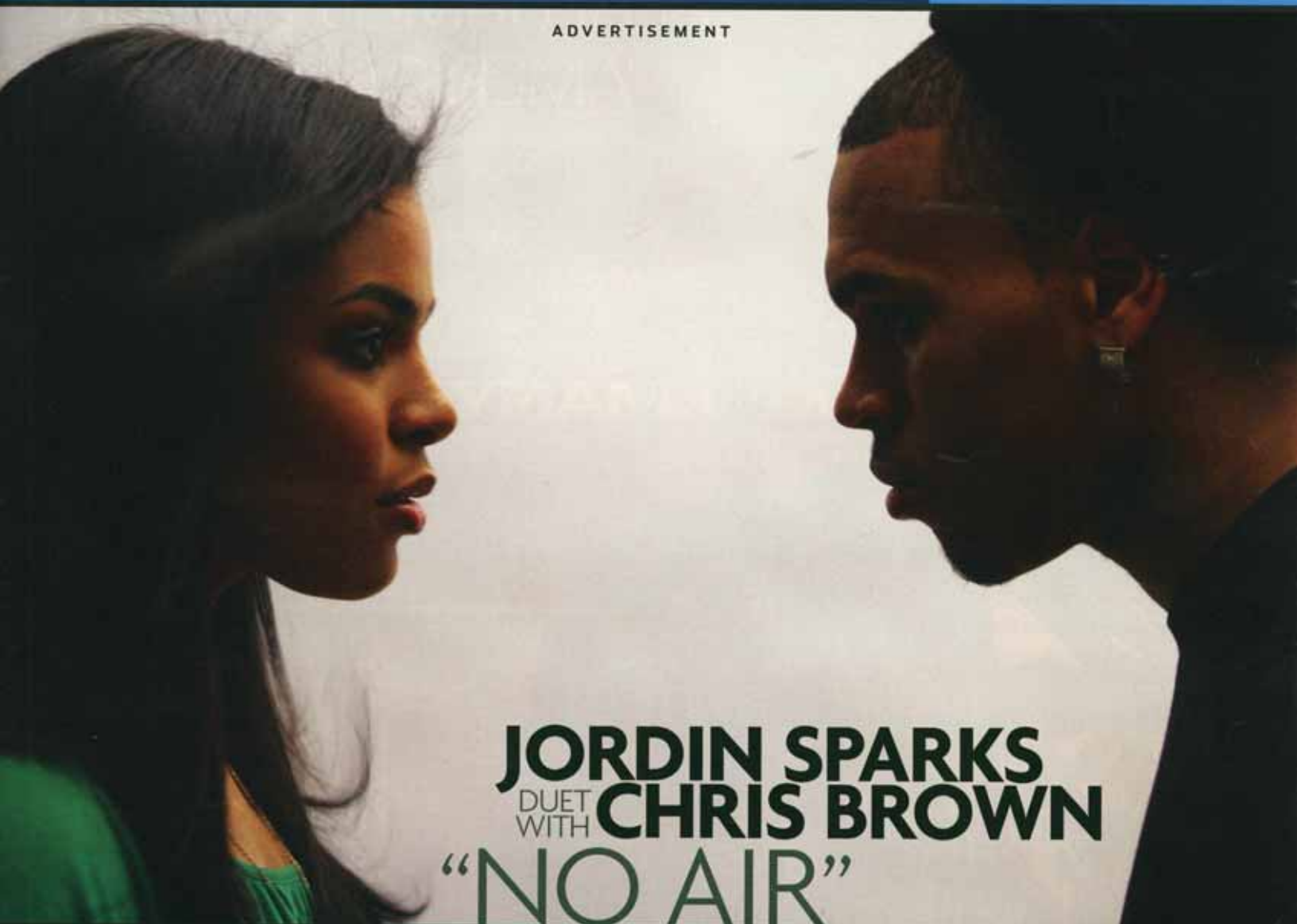
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DAMAGE CONTROL: How On-Air Talent, Execs And Stations Can Save Face Via Savvy Crisis Management **p.14**

THE PPM: Arbitron Strives To Keep Pace With 18-34 Sample **p.29**

SALES: Online Sales Training, YouTube-Style **p.8**

TALENT: Bubba The Love Sponge Soaks Satellite And Terrestrial Airwaves **p.58**



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Online sales training programs offer value,
but only when matched with real-world experience

Sales Training, YouTube-Style

Alexandra Cahill
ACahill@RadioandRecords.com

'The current generation is in tune with a YouTube style of learning. Make it fast, fun and effective.'

—Katey McGuckin

When the RAB released figures last week showing total radio revenue slipped by 2% last year, the pressure on already time-starved sales managers was kicked up another notch. The decline is occurring as managers and sellers have larger portfolios and platforms to monetize than they did in the past and as they compete for ad dollars with an expanding array of new media options available to marketers. This confluence of trends is underscoring the need for better training for radio sales personnel, whether it's the rookie seller or grizzled veteran.

In today's climate of cutbacks and cost-slashing, budget-conscious broadcasters are turning to online training courses offered by the RAB and such vendors as Overland Park, Kan.-based P1 Selling.

High Sales Staff Turnover

P1 Selling partner Speed Marriott notes how dramatically the radio industry has changed since he segued from copywriter to account executive in the early '80s. "Prior to deregulation, we represented one station, so naturally staffs were much smaller. It was much more conducive to mentoring."

Fast forward to today and senior sales managers often oversee the sales efforts of an entire cluster. "In my own experience as director of sales, I had seven radio stations and nine direct reports—six general sales managers, one national sales manager, one sports marketing manager and a nontraditional revenue director," Marriott says. He was also responsi-

ble for 50-60 account managers. The turnover was so high at the cluster, Marriott adds, that he didn't know the last names of some entry-level sellers.

Jacobs Media GM/sales consultant Paul Jacobs says "overwhelming pressures" caused by year-end revenue losses and sweeping personnel cuts have made training and mentoring new hires less of a priority. It's a challenge for managers to build long-term strategies to develop and nurture new people when the emphasis is on short-term results, he adds.

"It's difficult in all areas of our business," Jacobs says. In spite of the challenges the industry faces, there's never been a time when it's been more crucial to invest in sales training, salespeople and new presentations models, he adds.

Subscription-Based Service

Marriott and partner Katey McGuckin recognized the need for a flexible and customized online radio sales training system. A former morning show host and Bonneville public service director, McGuckin had worked with Marriott in Kansas City where he was already established at Advantage Systems, which provides training programs and other sales services to radio. Inspired by the global Web-based training provided by her friend Paul Russell's company, eJ4, McGuckin recruited Marriott and, together, last April they launched P1 Selling as a video training program tailored specifically for radio. The company claims to have clients from 110 stations in 36 markets and 11 states.

Its goal is to make the training process "quick and creative" and simple for the casual or sophisticated computer user. "The current generation is in tune with a YouTube style of learning,"

McGuckin says. "Make it fast, fun and effective. Short classes are key, followed with testing and accountability for management through user reports so they stay on top of training."

The service, which is offered as a one-year subscription, features 130 eight- to 12-minute classes that are available 24/7. In addition to sales training, the company offers segments on programming, production, human resources and FCC compliance.

Hundley Batts, GM for Broadcast One, which owns stations in Nashville and Huntsville, Ala., says he uses the service for new and veteran sellers. "In our case, it is something we integrated into a 15-day orientation program that is our formal training process for new sellers," Batts says. "Plus, it is a refresher for on-going teaching moments throughout the year."

Anchorage Media Group GM Scott Smith, whose company also uses the service, says the industry has gone from the "Jason Jennings 'tell me, sell me' VHS training tape approach to a modern, Web-based system that stresses return on investment, accountability, interactive and other new millennium issues."

But Smith cautions that not every new hire is born to sell and that "no [amount of] training can make a pig sing." Jacobs adds that in radio sales, you have to go out and do it in the real world. It's not enough to sit at the computer and watch training videos: "You have to apply it and sit in front of a client and fail and learn from those failures and build up your skill set that way."

Similarly, the RAB's online training academy does not focus solely on new sales hires. It recently added an Advanced Radio Sales program to the group's existing curriculum to "help radio sales professionals enhance their marketing knowledge and selling skills." The classes, which are based on eight years of successfully training more than 10,000 sellers and managers, are available online and in-person.

"If I've learned anything by being involved in sales training for the RAB for the past 18 years," executive VP of the services division Mike Mahone says, "it's that continuous training is critical to sales success. It's with this understanding that we've built and continue to develop programs like the Academy Online that can be utilized in a variety of ways to meet the diverse needs of our members."

The 36-year broadcasting veteran adds that "radio has continued to grow in terms of opportunities, but those opportunities have come at a price: complexity." In the current environment, "sellers must be able to master fundamental sales skills that were and continue to be important and they must also be able to demonstrate continuously higher levels of knowledge and expertise in new areas such as multiplatform and digital selling."

According to McGuckin, everyone is working on new ways to approach changes in the industry. Interactive is "obviously a huge growth area" and the most efficient way to respond to industry shifts quickly.

"Given the top-line cutbacks that are flowing through the industry right now, there are a percentage of companies that are not going to spend the money," but the smartest companies will invest in salespeople and sales training, Jacobs says. "That might fly in the face of what a lot of companies can do financially, but I don't see any other way." **R&R**

