

RVI REPORT:

Terrestrial Radio in Rural & Small-Town America

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Radio and Rural

Local, terrestrial radio in rural and small-town communities can be a powerful medium for effective communication with voters. The Rural Voter Institute examined how to effectively utilize this unique medium of communication with panels of rural and small-town Wisconsin voters.

Who We Interviewed

For purposes of these focus groups, we selected 15 rural, small-town, and exurban panelists across two groups in January, 2024. Panelists were required to be registered voters in Wisconsin who considered themselves ideologically conservative or moderate, self-identifying as Republican or independent voters. Fourteen of the 15 panelists voted for Trump in at least one of the two past Presidential elections. Seven of the 15 panelists were registered Republican voters and eight were registered independent. Ideologically, five participants self-identified as politically moderate, eight identified as somewhat conservative, and two identified as very conservative. Two of the 15 participants voted for Trump in 2016 and Biden in 2020, while ten voted for Trump in both 2016 and 2020. One participant voted for Clinton in 2016 and Trump in 2020, one participant voted for Biden in 2020 and voted for Sanders in 2016, and one participant voted for Trump in 2016 and refrained from voting in 2020. We completed the focus groups online via video conference. Prior to the focus groups, in written forms, panelists self-identified on their radio listening habits. Three group participants primarily listened to terrestrial radio at work, four primarily at home, seven listened mostly in their vehicles, and one listened both at work and in their vehicle. Five panelists purported to tune in 1-2 times per week, two listened 3-5 times per week, five listened every day, one listened on weekdays, one listened once a month, and one stated they never listen to the radio.

Topline Findings and Recommendations

“Learn More” Ads. While news was not a predominantly named item for which radio listeners selected programming, multiple panelists mentioned that they like “snippets” of news and referenced listening to local radio for “the obituaries and the school board” news. Multiple panelists described preferring news in small bits that were structured throughout their radio consumption. The term “snippets” of news was brought up independently in both groups.

Multiple panelists voiced a preference for a “learn more option” to hear more about topics that interested them. A segment of panelists expressed an interest in having an option to hear more with guest experts interpreting it if a snippet of news caught their attention. However, this was a minority opinion and was limited only to topics that caught the panelists’ interests. There was a resistance amongst multiple panelists to having expert guests providing lengthy discussion of the news but there was a warmer reception for that format as an optional (online) add-on or in a call-in format. The groups were largely split on limiting expert guests or those with different viewpoints.

Recommendation: Create a radio-like or podcast-format longform, localized content to be provided for “learning more” via radio ads and online ads to the target population of rural and small-town radio listeners (see previous RVI reports for priority persuadable demographics in rural and small-town communities). This ad creative would appear as radio ads referring people where to hear more online or online ads linking directly to long-form discussion content.

Cross-Platform Campaign. When a discussion arose of where they would get more information, panelists said they would “Google it” and had trust issues (with three exceptions amongst panelists) following up on the same radio station’s website or app where they heard the original news story. Virtually every panelist (with rare exceptions for a preference for call-in formats with guests) preferred the idea of a host or reporter “reading” the news in “snippets” – short digestible, informative doses of news. The decline in trust in news was essentially universal amongst panelists. This stretched far enough that their measure of trust in radio news was the ability to “Google” the same news and find corroborating coverage or points of view from websites other than that radio station.

Recommendation: This research suggests a strong marketing promotional mechanism would be a cross-platform program where campaigns, Party committees, and like-minded entities book surrogates and candidates on local rural and small-town radio while at the same time promoting hyper-local creative paid content on social media and search ads promoting appearances and hyperlocal messaging to target audiences within the listenership. Search-engine ads targeted locally on the topics of the interview that run in the same time frame would be of distinct value.

Saturation. Rural and small-town panelists voiced their consumption of terrestrial radio often as background entertainment and information. People described the times they most commonly and regularly listened to terrestrial radio as times when they were filling audible space while driving, mowing the lawn, doing the dishes, doing laundry, walking the dogs, and working at their job. One participant [33, female, Republican, moderate, voted Trump/Biden] said she kept the radio playing “12 hours a day” in the background. Most panelists said their primary taste in radio was music or morning disc jockey talk including humorous discussion of current events, appreciating the humor in the talk. A minority of panelists gravitated to opinion talk, but most did not.

Recommendation: Earned media and interviews are not enough nor is a placation of ads. Local radio in rural and small-town communities is an important communication medium that requires steady and consistent paid media ad buys as listeners are not always actively listening. This scenario of audio “filler” provides long-form opportunities to imprint messages via radio advertising.

Localization and Live Remotes. A panelist mentioned the idea of doing an in-depth radio interview with a local business: interviewing people there about the history of the business, what it does, and its future. Panelists largely found this concept interesting. This new data follows previous RVI data collected in Wisconsin, Michigan, and Minnesota about the importance of rural and small-town Main Street businesses for the perceived long-term sustainability of the community.

Recommendation: This research suggests the value of a series of live remotes conducted at local businesses (retail, food and beverage, and service), sponsored by campaigns, party committees, or other progressive organizations. The live remotes would focus on local content such as work to support rural small businesses. Validators or surrogates (including those associated with the business) would prove valuably persuasive.

Surrogates: Real People and Human Interest. Multiple panelists mentioned that they like “snippets” of news and referenced listening to local radio for “the obituaries and the school board” news. Multiple panelists described preferring news in small bits that were structured throughout their radio consumption time. The term “snippets” of news was brought up independently in both groups. When researching the idea of hyper-local officeholders supporting or interpreting state or national news, the idea fell flat. Panelists were asked whom they trusted more to weigh in on events in the news: a local city official or a member of Congress and uniformly they responded that they trusted neither. This data suggests that local elected officials are strong guests for their own branding and ideological local branding, but not for upstream candidates. Panelists discussed a preference for human interest guests and guests who were themselves local and impacted by the news items discussed in a broadcast.

Recommendation: Candidates benefit from time spent on rural and small-town local radio, but the standard idea of having a local office holder endorse and represent on the radio a candidate running for higher office is not effective with rural and small-town persuadable voters. Ideal surrogates would have a human-interest angle or be a “real person” in the local community talking about the candidate’s impact on their lives, for example: a parent or small business owner talking about why the candidate is the right choice for schools or small business, respectively.

Discussion Not Debate. With only one exception, panelists preferred “news” to debate. Acrimony was a reason most panelists cited to change the channel.

Recommendation: Negative ads persist in politics because they work, but the importance of media mix must not be overlooked. Positive, hyper-local ad creative should be the dominate aspect in a paid media mix on rural and small-town, local radio. Similarly, surrogates and candidates should be prepared to present positive, values-based message frames without getting themselves in a contentious debate.

Top Concerns

Panelists' top concerns for themselves, their families, communities, and the country were overwhelmingly focused on the economy and inflation. Inflation was a near unanimous concern. One panelist talked about the pressure of putting together their son's wedding amidst the inflation [64, female, independent, moderate, voted Trump/Trump] while another panelist talked of losing her job to downsizing [51, female, independent, somewhat conservative, voted Clinton/Trump]. Two panelists spoke of shortages of individuals to hire. Immigration was the second most stated concern. Lesser mentioned was concern over wars around the globe and one panelist spoke of education as a concern.

News Consumption

For five years RVI has tracked news media consumption amongst panelists in Midwestern battleground states. We have seen a prevalence of rightwing media dominance, social media influence, word-of-mouth influence, as well as veins of local news and mainstream news influence. Our most recent focus groups (January 2024, Wisconsin) focused on local radio and news consumption. The most prevalent individual sources of news named by panelists included Fox News, Facebook, local TV (although few local TV outlets were mentioned twice) and news aggregators. One panelist referenced listening to terrestrial radio for breaking news; specifically, "ultra-current" news as he described it [38, male, independent, moderate, voted Trump/Biden].

When asked where they consumed their news, panelists were mostly specific in naming outlets, including but not limited to:

- Fox News
- CNN
- Epoch Times
- Conservative radio (described generically)
- Conservative websites (described generically)
- New York Post
- Daily Mail
- Real Clear Politics
- News aggregators (described generically)
- Twitter
- Facebook

- Social media
- Hardcopy, statewide newspaper (purchased and read twice monthly)
- Apple News
- Google News
- USA Today
- Local, weekly newspaper's website
- Local NPR
- DiscloseTV feed on social media
- Breaking911 feed on social media
- Talk radio "24-7"
- Local TV affiliates by name
- New York Times website
- Miami Herald website
- From spouses
- National ABC News at 5:30
- 1440 Daily Digest
- Reuters online

Radio Listenership

When radio listenership was specifically explored, panelists discussed a multifaceted perception of the medium. When asked what kind of news people sought from terrestrial radio, the overwhelming answer was local, followed by current events, with a small margin referencing sports. Panelists wanted to hear predominantly local news, followed to a lesser extent by state news, with a smaller portion of national news.

One panelist listened primarily to conservative talk radio on Sirius Satellite radio. Another panelist mentioned listening to Sirius for music. At least one panelist defined terrestrial radio as just for music [56, female, Republican, somewhat conservative, voted Trump/Trump]. Another panelist talked about splitting his listening time between regional disc jockeys talking about current events in the morning and satellite radio for music in the afternoon, noting he commuted 45 minutes twice a day [41, male, Republican, somewhat conservative, voted Trump/Trump]. Another panelist described listening to terrestrial radio for mostly music and "some news and talk." [28, male, Republican, very conservative, voted Trump/Trump] Multiple panelists of both genders ranging the ages of 33 to 67 could recall specific local or regional radio stations they listened to regularly. Panelists described liking "funny and relatable" hosts and local information. One panelist [64, female, independent, moderate, voted Trump/Trump] described liking political talk with "feisty personalities."

Two panelists described seldom if ever listening to terrestrial radio [37, male, Republican, somewhat conservative, voted Trump/Trump; and 38, male, independent, moderate, voted Trump/Biden], one describing mostly listening to podcasts for "deep-dive" news coverage and

another who listened primarily to streaming music. Another panelist [49, female, independent, somewhat conservative, voted Trump in 2016 and did not vote in 2020] initially referred to only listening to streaming radio but later discussed specific stations locally to which she listened.

One participant described listening to the iHeart radio app for conservative talk radio “24-7” and mostly just listening to local terrestrial radio for local sports [64, female, independent, moderate, voted Trump/Trump]. A handful of panelists described using the online website of a local radio station to listen via Bluetooth while gardening, etc. When choosing a terrestrial radio station, on more than one occasion, panelists mentioned reception as a factor.

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