

Coming to You Live

Radio Rows Provide Priceless Benefits to Conferences

By Amber Christian and Dave Mohel

Political conferences have evolved over the years and create unique opportunities for like-minded leaders to gather. While the experiences at such conferences may be unique, the event infrastructure is considered standard industry-wide. Logistics decisions such as speakers, schedules, attendees, and so on are the backbone of a successful conference. More recently, however, a new conference element has found a home at political gatherings across the country. “Radio rows,” which are a collection of broadcasters that air live content from the same location, have become more prevalent at large and small conferences.

Radio rows are a critical part of annual events like the Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC). Conference planners have come to realize the benefits of adding a radio row to their gathering, which include securing free advertising to promote the event, building relationships with key talk radio leaders, and gaining added incentives for co-sponsors and attendees seeking media attention.

For decades, talk radio has been a haven for conservative ideas. Ideas of limited government, individual freedom, and family values have benefited from the long format only talk radio has to offer. Thoughtful discussion of ideas that cannot be summed up in a five-minute television interview play out every day

on three- and four-hour radio shows. Listener calls and participation advance the grassroots nature of radio programs and the conservative movement. National issues with local impact and local problems with global implications find a voice on radio airwaves. Candidates for president and local offices use talk radio to engage with voters. Talk radio has played a key role in promoting and unifying conservative ideas, which increases the importance of including it at conservative conferences.

Thanks to emerging technologies lowering the expense of remote broadcasts and increased competition among national and local radio shows, hosts are more willing to leave their studios for these special opportunities. Recently, radio stations have been impacted by the economic downturn. Less advertising as well as competition from new media has caused many stations to cancel their local shows in place of nationally syndicated content. As a result, competition among hosts in each market has increased. Therefore, while the number of shows available to attend a radio row has decreased, thriving stations are more motivated than ever to take part in events that set them apart from the crowd.

Once a radio program has agreed to attend a gathering, it is up to the organizers to assist in providing compelling content. Policy experts,



authors, elected officials, and grassroots leaders should be encouraged to take part in the tremendous opportunity available.

“What a host is looking for in a radio row is the ability to bring the newsmakers live to their listeners,” said Martha Zoller, a radio host syndicated statewide in Georgia and veteran of many radio rows. “Access is key and radio rows, if done correctly, give you that access.”

A conference can guarantee hosts hours of quality guests, breaking news, and information.

Of course, radio rows are not just rewarding to the event organizers and broadcasters, but also to the co-sponsors, speakers, and invited guests. At CPAC, for example, most attendees took advantage of the benefits radio row access provided. The face-to-face interaction between hosts and organization leaders is an incentive for groups to participate in any conference. While the conference receives free advertising by hosting a radio row, the attendees get the opportunity to discuss their issues on local and nationally syndicated shows, with the prospect of reaching millions of listeners across the country.

“CPAC co-sponsors and panelists look forward to being a part of radio row,” said Lisa De Pasquale, CPAC Director at the American Conservative Union. “Local groups and candidates gain national exposure, and experts can rely on doing dozens of interviews in a single day.”

Conference organizers may worry that media coverage will be one-sided or scarce. Including a radio row in a conference ensures that the message will be complete and somewhat controllable.

Technology has made radio rows a more viable solution to the media coverage concern for even the smallest of events. Most hotels, conference spaces, and convention centers are already wired with the necessary digital lines,

Internet connections, and additional phone lines needed for a high-quality broadcast. Additional equipment, if needed, can be rented at a nominal cost.

“CPAC makes it easy by having good equipment, an engineer on site, and available guests,” said Zoller.

In hosting a radio row, organizers must make major decisions about broadcast lengths and workspace sizes.

Allowing shows to broadcast multiple days at a conference can make equipment rental more economical and provide more extensive coverage. At CPAC 2010, nearly three dozen shows and networks broadcasted from 6 a.m. to 9 p.m., sharing 11 workstations. Local programs from Willmington, N.C., and Toledo, Ohio, were followed by nationally syndicated shows with hundreds of affiliates and millions of listeners each. CPAC 2010 Radio Row delivered over 300 hours of conference coverage and up-to-the-minute news to millions of potential activists, donors, and citizens.

An event that brings together large groups of attendees can instantly inform and motivate a large number of supporters. If the event is successful in developing long-lasting and mutually beneficial relationships with members of the media, indispensable returns on the radio row investment will continue over time.

As more people become involved in supporting conservative initiatives, political gatherings grow, and activism becomes more commonplace. Tea parties, town halls, and conventions are sprouting up organically every day. Talk radio has played an influential role in furthering conservative ideas for decades. A conference with a strong broadcast component energizes attendees and enables organizers to relay news as it happens at the event.

Ms. Christian and Mr. Mohel work for Advocacy Ink, a public relations firm that also coordinates radio rows for events.

