

# RADIOTHON REBOUND

## PPM Begins To Reveal Event's Impact

**S**ince Randy Owen helped form *Country Cares For St. Jude Kids* 20 years ago, Country radio has raised more than \$300 million for the **St. Jude Children's Research Hospital** in Memphis, thanks to radiothons by nearly 200 radio stations in at least 100 markets. More than 100 country artists have also participated, making this event a national cornerstone of Country radio and music's continuing collaborations for charity.

However, in recent years there's been a growing concern that programming radiothons in general – whether they benefit Country Cares, Children's Miracle Network, Make-A-Wish Foundation or others – may sometimes negatively affect station ratings for an unspecified period of time.

Because Arbitron's Portable People Meter methodology and analysis tools can reveal audience ratings on a day-by-day or even hourly basis, **Country Aircheck** asked Arbitron for data that could illuminate what really happens to station audiences during a radiothon. Ratings (in average-quarter-hour persons, or AQHP) were examined before, during and after *Country Cares* radiothons over the past nine months at **WUSN/Chicago**, **KBWF/San Francisco**, **KILT/Houston** (two events worth), **WKHX/Atlanta**, **WKLB/Boston** and **WMZQ/Washington, DC**. For both broadcasters and these important organizations, the results are quite encouraging.

### RAPID RECOVERY

While WMZQ actually saw a significant increase in average persons listening during its radiothon, most stations experienced a small decline. That would be expected, the shift in programming taking place during the two pledge days. In some cases, the drop-off from the daily quarter-hour audience ranged from a few percentage points to more than 50%. However, regardless of geography, time of year, days of the week or years of experience conducting these events, the stations' audiences quickly rebounded to their original size. In some cases, the "recovery" occurred the next business day or even during the radiothon itself; for others, it took an extra day or two before the station's AQHP returned to its weekday average for that month.

Moreover, the impact of that audience loss during those two days on the stations' overall monthly average was relatively small – from -0.4% to -4.5%. While "average time exposed" per day during the radiothons (the PPM equivalent of time spent listening), also declined in most cases, the drop-off was usually only 15 minutes per day.

### FORCES BE WITH YOU

It's important to note that outside factors also can have an effect on the average number of listeners to a station during a radiothon:

**Local events:** Two days prior to WUSN's *Country Cares* effort began last December, Illinois Governor Rod Blagojevich and his chief of staff were arrested on federal corruption charges. The next day, just before the radiothon began, President-elect Barack Obama urged the governor to resign. One can imagine radio listening in Chicago did not follow typical patterns that week.

Other major events also likely shifted listening behavior. The day before KILT's radiothon in late January, the local "Baby Grace" murder story became public. On the first day of WKLB's radiothon, convicted swindler Bernie Madoff was sentenced to prison. And in Washington, DC during WMZQ's fundraiser, there was a standoff with a gunman involving an evacuation, along with a big Georgetown basketball game.

**The competition:** If a Country station faces a direct rival, would their competitor gain listeners during the radiothon? Very

possibly. During the two days of KILT's 2008 event, crosstown **KKBQ** experienced a 34% increase in AQHP and a 25% uptick in TSL. But Classic Country **KTHT** actually lost 15% of its average audience and 25% of its TSL. During KILT's 2009 campaign, KKBQ's AQHP rose 28% with no TSL increase, while KTHT was up a whopping 67% in average persons and a 24% jump in TSL. And while WKHX's campaign was underway earlier this

**The economy:** The U.S. economy, already struggling throughout Q4 of 2008, continued to decline in early 2009, with the stock market falling sharply. It would seem reasonable that consumers facing difficult budget concerns might listen differently to a charity drive than they would in better times. In short, there could be a tune-out factor among those listeners who can't afford to pledge. While audience and TSL declined in most markets during the

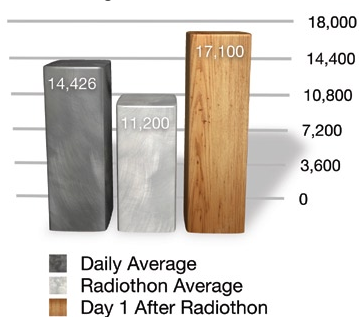
afterwards. As part of a station's ongoing PPM analysis, Arbitron recommends maintaining a daily log of local and national events, weather and other factors in order to better compare listening patterns on a weekly, monthly or even annual basis.

Ratings aside, it goes without saying that one must consider the overall goodwill (and revenues!) generated for the participating station and its advertisers by conducting these fundraising efforts, which can provide many lasting benefits, both tangible and intrinsic. Even more, there are the countless lives saved and changed when a station and community do something truly selfless.

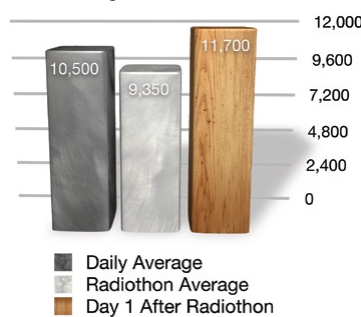
The bottom line is that the findings from these seven *Country Cares* radiothons show an average short-term loss of about

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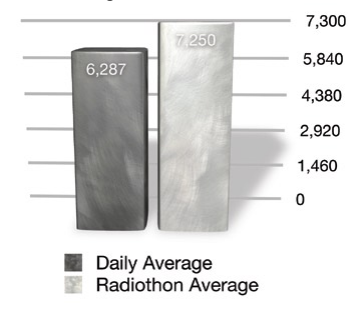
**WUSN/Chicago 2009 (15+ years)**  
Average Quarter-Hour Persons



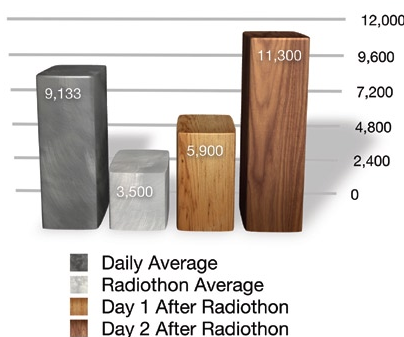
**KILT/Houston 2008 (4th year)**  
Average Quarter-Hour Persons



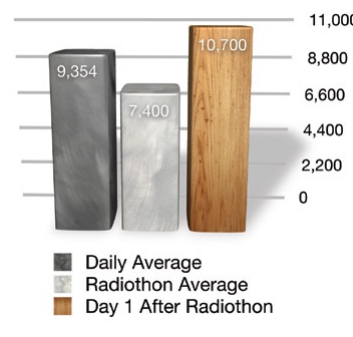
**WMZQ/Washington DC 2009 (15+ years)**  
Average Quarter-Hour Persons



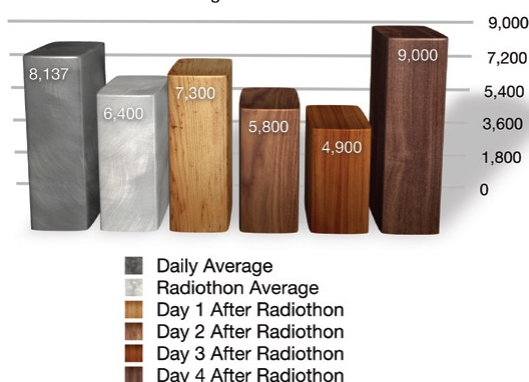
**KILT/Houston 2009 (5th year)**  
Average Quarter-Hour Persons



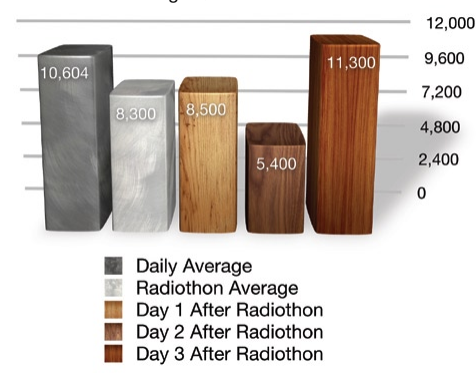
**KBWF/San Francisco 2009 (1st year)**  
Average Quarter-Hour Persons



**WKLB/Boston 2009 (13th year)**  
Average Quarter-Hour Persons



**WKHX/Atlanta 2009 (5th year)**  
Average Quarter-Hour Persons



year, competitor **WUBL** enjoyed a 70% AQHP jump and a 31% bump in TSL.

However, the gains noted above by the competitors actually far outpaced the temporary losses by the radiothon stations; these were not zero-sum trade-offs. And with only three examples across two markets, it's far too early to determine the real impact of one station's actions on another's.

radiothons, the hard-hit metro of Washington, DC actually saw its AQHP and TSL increase substantially. This goes to show that there is no hard-and-fast rule about any potential variable.

### MORE THAN NUMBERS

The overall point for broadcasters concerned about the effect of a radiothon is that they should not look strictly at the PPM ratings

20% AQHP, but stations recover almost immediately, and in some cases, even gain during the process. The results can and sometimes do vary significantly from one market to the next depending on a variety of outside factors. But ultimately, it's how a station and its competitors approach their own programming during these events that makes the biggest difference.