



# Taking Advantage Of Parity Situations

One of the rudiments of crafting a successful radio spot is to emphasize a benefit that fulfills listeners' needs in a unique way. This can be very easy. If your client manufactures hot air balloons and their rattan and wicker baskets are so safe they've been chosen to hang in the Smithsonian Air and Space Museum, it's not likely that another balloon fabricator can co-opt that claim.

It gets a little dicier if you're talking about a pizza parlor. A dry cleaner. A home heating oil company. There are many client categories in which parity between competitors is the rule of thumb. Some categories have slipped into this mode. My dad would only buy gasoline for his 1961 Rambler Ambassador at an Amoco dealer. He once ran out of fuel after passing up a perfectly good Esso station in hopes of making it to his preferred provider. They just don't make dads or brand loyalty like that anymore.

So what does a creative services director do when faced with a parity situation?

*Nobody is better at dealing with this situation than I am.* No, I am not flaunting my lack of modesty. I used that sentence to preface a lesson I learned as the newly hired senior copywriter on the Delta Air Lines account in the early '80s.

My first assignment was to write a radio script about Delta's non-stop service from Atlanta to New York City. Delta had 10 non-stops a day. The problem was, so did its three competitors. I was tasked to find a way to make Delta sound better. And I was told not to use stupid ideas, like better food or nicer flight attendants.

At first, I thought this was a "no-win" test, like the one Captain Kirk had to finesse in order to pass the Starfleet Academy, the one no other cadet had ever solved. Was this my *Kobayashi Maru* moment? I struggled for hours. The best I could do was envision where I might be working next. Pete Bowles, the wizened copy chief (and nephew of the founder of legendary ad agency Benton & Bowles), visited me in my office, saw my tortured face, scribbled something on a scrap of paper, and handed it to me.



**NOBODY HAS MORE DAILY NON-STOPS TO NEW YORK THAN DELTA.**

This became the core of the radio commercial, and it worked wonderfully — until a few days later, when a competitor added a midnight flight, giving them one extra non-stop per day. Again, I was flummoxed. And again, Pete Bowles came to my rescue. He told me to dig deeper, and handed me the Official Airline Guide. We discovered that Delta had five non-stops before noon, compared to four such flights for the other carriers. Pete scribbled:

**DELTA HAS THE MOST MORNING NON-STOPS TO NEW YORK.**

Because most business travelers wanted to leave in the morning, he explained, this was in Delta's favor.

All well and good, until one of the competitors moved an afternoon non-stop to before noon. By now, though, I was getting the gist of it. We'd been considering only LaGuardia and JFK


airports. "What if we included Newark, New Jersey?" I asked Pete, and this time I did the scribbling:

**DELTA HAS THE MOST MORNING NON-STOPS TO METRO NEW YORK.**

Four hours later, a new radio spot was on the air with that key message.

Pete grinned and gave me a slap on the back.

Nothing we'd done was disingenuous or misleading. Pete's lesson has served me well throughout the years; as I posulated earlier, *nobody is better than I am at finding ways to position parity situations in a positive light.* If that makes you presume I'm the best, so be it, even if that's not what I said.

If you look at your clients' claims-to-fame in a certain light, you can change a parity situation into something entirely more beneficial. And all things being equal, they'll love you for it. 

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