

A Radio Programming Guide to Play And Win

THE RATINGS GAME

**How to Outsmart the System,
Stack the Deck, and Win Big**

Strategies, systems and hacks to survive...and thrive

By Tracy Johnson





Introduction:

The Ratings System Is Broken

The ratings system is a mess. You know it. I know it. We all pretend it's fine, but it's not. It's one of the most outdated, error-prone, and misunderstood measurement systems in any industry, yet it still runs the show. Like a VHS player duct-taped to a Tesla dashboard, it doesn't belong anymore, but nobody's replaced it.

Every market has stories about wild swings in the numbers caused by a single household or millions of dollars in ad revenue riding on one anonymous person's lunch break listening habits. A single meter can sway an entire quarter, shift a format, or cost someone their job. And still, decision-makers twist themselves in knots trying to interpret trends that have the reliability of a Magic 8-Ball.

Let's make it real: Picture 70,000 fans packed into a stadium. In one section sits a diverse group of 150 people, ages six to 64, speaking different languages, working different jobs, from every income level. Make it make sense.

And yet, that's exactly what we do (or at least, allow) in broadcasting. Except it's worse. At least the stadium had 150 people. The average PPM market has just a few dozen active meters in circulation at any one time. You can't make this stuff up.

Ratings companies recruit their panels the old-fashioned way: direct mail, door-to-door visits, and cold phone calls. Think about how likely you are to answer the door for a stranger holding a clipboard these days.

But that's just the beginning. In a PPM market, the chosen few are asked to carry a pager-like device, now for up to 38 months, to record their radio listening behavior. And not just them: their entire household is roped into participating, too.

Let's be honest: these people are not typical listeners. They're not representative of your audience. They're the kind of folks who say "yes" to a seemingly endless listening

experiment that pays them a few bucks per month. The system has evolved (or devolved) to select people who are...let's call them *unusual*.

And to top it off? These panelists are **paid to listen**, and the more they listen, the more they are paid. There is literally a built-in incentive to distort actual listening behavior

“Not everything that counts can be counted, and not everything that can be counted counts.”

– WILLIAM BRUCE CAMERON (OFTEN MISATTRIBUTED TO ALBERT EINSTEIN)

It's wild. It's broken. But it matters.

Despite all its flaws, the ratings system is still how your success is measured. It determines who gets credit, who gets paid, and who gets promoted (or fired). One meter can make or break a PD's career. One household can be the reason a morning show is offered a multi-year contract or send managers searching for their next “solution.”

So yes, it's ridiculous. But it's also real. This is The Ratings Game, and if you're a programmer, talent, or brand strategist, you're playing whether you like it or not. So the only real question is: are you playing to win?

This book shows you how. Inside, you'll learn:

- What the ratings measure and how they work (or don't)
- How meters, samples, and weighting can work for or against you (and how to manipulate the system to take advantage of it)
- Three proven strategies to play the game (and when to switch them)
- Tactics to optimize programming, promotion, and personalities
- Hidden hacks to double your AQH without adding a single new listener

- The future of measurement—from connected cars to wearables

By the end, you'll know how to read the scoreboard, hack the game board, and maybe, just maybe, tip it in your favor.

With a bit of help from Radio Content Pro's digital spokesperson and radio geek Ava Hart (you'll see her insight and quips throughout the book), I'm here to help you sort it out, understand it, and game-plan a strategy to win The Ratings Game.

Tracy Johnson

"To win the game, one must first understand the game."

— ALBERT EINSTEIN



Chapter 1

The Ratings Game Explained - With No Corporate Spin

This is a crash course in the game you're being forced to play, whether you like it or not. Let's strip the jargon and expose what's really going on behind the curtain.

Before you can win the game, you need to know what you're playing and who's keeping score. This chapter lays out the board, the players, and the broken rules that still run the industry. Spoiler: It's not fair, but you can beat it if you understand how it's played.

You'd think we'd have found a more accurate, tech-forward solution by now. We explore the possibilities in Chapter 10, but don't skip ahead. For now? Sorry. Here we are, in the 21st century, still relying on shaky panels and statistical voodoo to make billion-dollar decisions.

Yet every week, month, and quarter, programmers, executives, and personalities across thousands of radio stations stress over the latest ratings. They fight tooth and nail over fractions of shares, battling other radio competitors for a shrinking pool of available audience. The stakes are high because:



Ava Hart's Key Insight

"The radio ratings process is absurd. It's broken. But if you're going to play (and you kind of have to), play it to win."

- Ad agencies control most media buys on radio, though not as much in smaller markets.
- A single ratings point can be the difference between getting a raise and being a victim of the next round of budget cuts.
- AQH is dwindling, and you're programming to shrinking ratings samples in a desperate street fight to get a larger share of a smaller pie. Your bonus isn't triggered by real listening growth. It's basically Squid Game, but with slightly fewer masked guards and more spreadsheets.

But here's the deal: whether you love it, hate it, or pretend it doesn't matter, it's game on. If you're in a rated market, this is the job. This is how success is measured. This is the scoreboard.

So before we start bending the rules (Rule-benders will love Chapter 7-don't skip ahead), let's take a clear-eyed look at how the game is played. Because you can't beat it or game it until you know the rules.

Audience Turnover = Cume / AQH

This ratio reveals the number of *different listeners required to maintain your station's average audience level*. The higher the turnover, the more people are coming and going. The lower the turnover, the more people are sticking around.

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High Turnover? You're probably growing Cume but struggling to hold them. Is there a product problem? Maybe. Could it be fixed by adjusting the clocks? Perhaps. However, the station may be gaining secondary listeners, who aren't tuning in as long or as often.

How about Low Turnover? You've built loyalty and strong TSL. As discussed earlier, your format and target audience are key factors in turnover. It could also be due to losing Cume, which makes Turnover look better, but is killing your growth.

That's why tracking this metric over time is valuable.

Let's break it down:

If a station has a Cume of 100,000 and an AQH of 10,000, turnover is 10 (Cume divided by AQH).


If another station has the same Cume but an AQH of 20,000, turnover drops to 5. Fewer people are doing more listening. That's a stickier station. You can quickly (and correctly) conclude that turnover is a window into audience behavior.

Are you attracting more people who sample and leave compared to stations in a similar format? Has your turnover been increasing or decreasing over time? Are there seasonal changes from one quarter to another? This metric can't answer those questions, but it can shine a spotlight on the subject.



Ava Hart's Key Insight:

"Audience turnover tells you how often to jam that new Dua Lipa hit, and whether you can play Thousand Dollar Minute more often. Stack smart bets and you win."

 **Think of Turnover as a loyalty index. High churn? The bucket is leaking. Patch it. Low churn? Double down on why they stay. But you must also take into account the Cume pattern. Remember, if Cume goes down, TSL almost certainly increases. This relationship affects Turnover and how you should interpret it.**

CONTINUED: Get the full version of THE RATINGS GAME to unlock insights, strategies, and tips.



The Ratings System Is Broken. But You Still Have to Play To Win.

Welcome to ***The Ratings Game***—a brutally honest, deeply practical guide that pulls back the curtain on how radio ratings really work.

Tracy Johnson doesn't just expose the flaws—he shows you how to exploit them.

“Whether you love the game or hate it, you have to play it. This book shows you how the game is played. It's filled with details for PPM and Diary methodology...and best of all, I show you how to play the nuances to win.”

-Tracy Johnson

 **Ava Hart says:**

“The ratings system is jankier than a folding table at a tailgate party. Stop hoping it's fair. Learn the rules. Learn the loopholes. Then rig it in your favor.”



Tracy Johnson
media group

