

April Fools'

Programming Guide

Be Clever - Have Fun - Stay Out of Trouble

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Introduction

April Fools' Programming Guide

It's sad that many radio stations (and companies) have shut down April Fools' jokes on the air. However, if they fit the character's style and are executed well, they can be a terrific way to advance a personality's storyline and create attention.

There are three basic rules to follow:

1. Be clever. Don't settle for low-hanging fruit!
2. Have fun, but take time to plan and prepare.
3. Stay out of trouble! Make sure management is on board with the prank.

If still in doubt, contact an attorney for advice before proceeding. I've never seen an April Fools' prank worth losing the station license or Endangering your brand's reputation.

Follow the guidelines in this Ebook and have a safe and fun April Fools' Day.

Tracy Johnson



Chapter 1

Stay Out of Trouble!

April Fools' Day can be a great opportunity for radio shows, as long as you use common sense and stay out of trouble. Unfortunately, many stations get into trouble. Usually, it happens because of poor planning and preparation.



Observe these programming tips and there's no reason most stations can't pull off a prank that can be fun on the air and generate talk in the community.

The first consideration, though, is to stay out of trouble. No prank is worth a fine from the government or lawsuit.

Above all, remember this:

FCC rule Section 73.1217 prevents stations from airing any information about a "crime or catastrophe" on the air, if the broadcaster (1) knows the information to be false, (2) it is reasonably foreseeable that the broadcast of the material will cause substantial public harm and (3) public harm is in fact caused.

Public harm is defined as “direct and actual damage to property or to the health or safety of the general public, or diversion of law enforcement or other public health and safety authorities from their duties.

This was put in place many years ago after Orson Welles’ famous War Of the Worlds broadcast caused a public panic. But it is still a law, and the FCC takes it seriously.

So rule #1 for April Fools’ Day: do not break laws or operate outside the public interest.

There’s simply no defense for violating this principle. It’s the kind of thing that gets programmers and air personalities fired. It’s impossible to defend!

If in doubt, work with management and get legal counsel before launching a prank.

FCC Rule Against Hoaxes

Fake News

It’s easy to make up a story and put it on the air as if it were true. But that’s not very clever. Creating fake news is low hanging fruit. Leave it alone.

Some stations think it’s fun to air a news story that a popular sports celebrity has been traded or retired. It causes attentional first, but in a few minutes, listeners become annoyed because it’s so easy to discover it’s fake. So what’s the point?

That doesn’t mean fake stories don’t work as pranks. They do. But it has to be creative, like those outlined in this guide.

By the way, news stations or brands that depend on news credibility should be very careful about involving news talent in a prank.

Chapter 2

April Fools' Day Don't's

Before getting to the fun part (the pranks), there are a few things to avoid. Some pranks won't cause a lawsuit or put a programmer's job in jeopardy, but still aren't the best ideas. Here are some general guidelines that will apply to April Fools strategy.

Don't Joke About Things That Matter

Announcing that a celebrity will appear in a live, free concert is weak.

A prank that claims lions have escaped from the zoo and are on the loose will backfire.

It's irresponsible. These ideas are easy to promote, but they violate the main rule of avoiding Low-Hanging Fruit.

Low Hanging Fruit

Besides, you are better than that. You can be much more clever (and effective).

And, though the goal is for the idea to spread through the community, don't build a strategy around things that damage the public interest or frighten them.

One of my favorite pranks was when Dave, Shelley, and Chainsaw (then on KGB/ San Diego) promoted that the Stealth Bomber would be at a small airfield in San Diego.

Thousands came to see something that can't be seen. It was brilliant because it was plausible (see below). And while many listeners skipped work or took their kids out of school, it was a harmless prank executed in good fun.

Don't Get People Hurt!

Putting individuals or the public in physical danger is off-limits. Always.

It's okay to mess with them. It's fine to cause them to go out of their way a bit. It's part of the fun. But there's a line that should not be crossed.

Don't disrupt listener lives in a way that causes damage.

A few years ago, a station announced a beer truck had turned over on a major freeway. The morning show announced that city officials were looking for volunteers to carry off the beer. For free! Why? Because they want to get traffic moving and it was faster to clear the road this way than wait for a clean up crew.



Of course, it drew a large crowd. And of course, listeners couldn't find it because it didn't exist. It was fake news.

The result was hundreds listeners parking on the freeway and walking to get around the traffic jam. Not good. It was dangerous. And not clever.

About Pranking Utilities and Institutions

Pranks involving utilities, organizations, and public institutions can be great fun. But take extra precautions. Here are a few additional guidelines:

- Make sure management is ready for the segment. Someone from the utility will call and complain or demand that the prank end because they quickly tire of endless phone calls asking about it. You might even inform the organization and give them a "heads up" before going on the air.

- Use a generic name in all references on the air. For example, make it "The Water Company" or "The Electric Company," not the actual name of the business or utility. This helps protect you from legal problems.

- Observe all recommendations for keeping people safe outlined in this book.

Don't be like this show in Florida that played the common prank about dihydrogen monoxide coming out of faucets. Of course, that's the chemical term for water, so it is absolutely true. But still.

Pranking "The Phone Company"

Chapter 3

Anatomy of a Great Prank

Now that potential problems are clear(er), let's identify what makes a great April Fools' radio prank. Gather a team of fun, smart folks for a brainstorming session. Then put the ideas through this list of qualities.

It Must Be Plausible

A good prank absolutely must be plausible. Plausible means it must "seem or be reasonable or probable." In other words, it has to sound like it *could* happen.

A plausible prank could be extreme and unlikely, but it sounds possible.

A joke about a new law that prevents walking on the left side of the sidewalk when meeting another person is plausible. It's weird and improbable but credible.

Similarly, a claim that there's a law against checking a mobile phone while walking within city limits sounds bizarre, but it's plausible.

It is plausible to claim that a new law has gone into effect that prohibits eating in the car while driving, particularly with existing hands-free laws. This can make a good prank.

But claiming that punishment for any of these is a life sentence in a federal penitentiary blows the prank. It isn't plausible, and this just won't work.

Plausible:

Seeming reasonable or probable: Example: "a plausible explanation". Also: credible, reasonable, believable, feasible, possible, conceivable, imaginable, convincing, thinkable

(of a person) skilled at producing persuasive arguments, especially ones intended to deceive."a plausible liar"



Is it Clever?

There's often a thin line between clever and sophomoric. While it's a matter of taste, a creative, clever prank is usually simple in nature, yet not obvious.

Be Clever And Simple

Some stations build pranks around stories that are easy to check out, like trading a famous athlete from the local team. Listeners quickly find it's not true because it's easy to check out and refute.

There's no payoff because the only word of mouth is from listeners who hate you for being stupid!

A good prank is simple but designed with layers.

A few years ago, the morning show on a client station put calls on from folks who were ticketed that morning for violating a new law against eating or drinking any beverage while driving their car.

The show "discovered" the new "law" along with the audience and then described it as the "controversial new law ruining many commuters' morning." It was a terrific prank because the show sounded like it was being pranked along with the audience.

By the show's end, the personalities "figured out" they were had and revealed it as a highly orchestrated April Fools' prank organized by listeners. They then apologized for being a victim "just like you were" and blamed one of the cohosts for being so gullible, a character trait for that personality!

No Eating In The Car

Let Listeners Help

Consider getting early morning listeners involved in a prank. This can be highly effective.

April Fools' jokes are always more effective with audience participation that adds credibility to a claim.

Staging callers is fine, but it's fun to get listeners help spread the prank through social media. Bring the early audience into the "inner circle" and reveal every aspect of the prank on the air. Tell them their role and ask for help. The core fans love it and add credibility to the prank.

They'll be great callers, will promote it on social media and usually call back after the reveal because they feel part of the success.

Keeping It Simple

Elaborate pranks don't always work because there are too many details, and it's too hard to understand. If the prank can't be described in one or two sentences, it's probably too complicated.

Simplify it, then add details that support the premise. Maintaining this clear focus will prevent confusing listeners, which causes tune-out and defeats the intention.

Keep Claims Vague

Be descriptive, but keep your claims vague as a prank plays out.

A few years ago, Star 100.7 in San Diego pranked listeners with an announcement about a fictitious water salinization plant testing their new "lines."

The prank is detailed in the next chapter, but it worked because the announcements sounded official, with descriptive details. However, there were few facts. It was vague. References to "the new salinization plant" made it sound like everyone knew about it.

The call to action was for listeners to cover faucets at home with a balloon just in case “red dye and gas” came through pipes during testing. It was a tremendous success.

Make Sure the Prank Fits

Some personalities shouldn’t be pranksters. The audience wouldn’t expect it from the show, and it could damage your personality brand rather than enhance it.

Perhaps playing pranks is not part of the personality’s skillset. You don’t have to do one. But if you work at it, chances are you can find something that enhances your brand.

This was the case at Majic 100 in Ottawa. The show wanted to do *something,* but it was not a natural fit. Their solution was The Time Warp. The basic outline was to:

- Play songs from a specific year in the past (about 20 years ago) as if they were new.
- Talk about pop culture (events, movies, television, sports, etc.) happening as if it were happening in real-time.
- Read news stories from that year.
- Bring back old jingles or station imaging.
- Promote personalities that were on the air that year but have moved on.
- Put listeners on, but pretend you don’t know what they’re talking about.

It fit the station brand perfectly (they had an extensive gold library). A prank like this could catch on and become a fun one-hour weekly feature.

Listen To The Time Warp

Chapter 4

Classic April Fools' Pranks

Sometimes it helps to have some thought starters, so here are a few general prank ideas for April Fools Day.

Easy Audio Pranks

Here are three ideas that rely on playing audio to prank the audience.

The Garage Door Tone prank is a classic.

Broadcast a tone that, according to a station "engineer", opens some, but not all, automatic garage doors.

Of course, this can't happen in reality, but it's *plausible*. The joke, of course, is listeners on the way to work wonder if their door has opened.

To pull it off, arrange for "neighbors and friends" to testify that when they turned up the radio in the garage, "Sure enough, the door opened!"

Prove it by playing the tone while the caller is in the garage. When the tone is played, they push the button and listeners hear the sound of the door going up and down.

The Phone Prank is really easy. Every 10 minutes or so, play a cell phone ringing in the background.

Idea:The Ringing Phone

Make sure it's loud enough to be heard, but not so loud that it obviously comes through car speakers.

Let it ring 4-5 times, then stop. Never say anything about it, and don't acknowledge it. Just play it behind you.

The Lost Cat is similar to the ringing phone. Play a meowing cat in the background every 30-45 seconds. Listeners in cars will pull over, thinking a cat is trapped in their engine.

The Cat Prank



Confusion

Some pranks are effective because they confuse listeners and arouse curiosity. The audio examples (Lost Cat, Phone Ringing, and The Time Warp are great examples.

A percentage of the audience will figure it out, while others just don't catch on. Some stations will reveal the prank. Others leave it to the audience to figure out that it's April 1.

Programming Pranks

In addition to The Time Warp, there are many examples of programming pranks that call attention to a station's brand.

Here are a few:

Switch Personalities. If air talent is high profile, changing shows is an easy way to get some attention. Flip the morning and afternoon show, for example. Or, some shows have been successful switching names. This is more effective (not to mention strange) if the personalities are male and female. A male host saying, "I'm Jennifer" stands out.

Switch Formats With Another Station. This can work for very well-established stations, but usually, the only folks who *get it* are the biggest fans of the station.

To pull this off, switch everything with a sister station. For best results, both stations should have a sense of humor. It doesn't work so well for a Mainstream AC station to switch with Hip Hop!

Play Only Covers. This is my favorite in this category. CJAQ (Jack-FM)/Calgary plays hit songs but only the cover versions during their morning show on April Fool's Day. It's funny to hear them introduce Jumpin' Jack Flash by The Rolling Stones but play a different version.

There are thousands of cover songs to choose from. Check into Scott Bradley's Post Modern Jukebox on YouTube for some great ideas.

Music (Format) Prank

Theatre of the Mind Pranks

Catch It And Keep It. Many years ago, National Lampoon produced a comedy album called Radio Dinner. There's a track called Catch It And Keep It.



It's easy to replicate this with theater-of-the-mind production and imagination.

The essence of the segment is to drop items from the top of the highest building in the area.

Promote that those gathered keep whatever they catch. Start with small items like tickets and stuffed animals. As the segment continues, start exaggerating to small electronics like phones.

As the morning goes on, add big-screen TVs, javelins, cars, Golden Retrievers, and a Bengal tiger.

Be sure to produce the segment in advance to get the sound effects right.

Listen To Catch It & Keep It

The Insatiable Sex Addict

This one is for edgier stations only, obviously.

Find someone to play the role of a guest on the show. They can be in the studio or on the phone.

The basic concept: He or she has an insatiable appetite for sex and is looking for partners. Get their whole story in as much detail as is comfortable. Take listener calls to answer questions. Then announce a phone number to call.

The phone number is a message from the guest that reveals it's his or her April Fools' prank, working with the radio station. Invite them to leave a message anyway, because "you never know".

Later, after the prank is revealed on the air, play the frustrated and angry responses from callers.

It also works to adjust the storyline slightly. The guest reveals they are tired of having so many partners and while still addicted to sex, is now wishing to settle down with one person. The phone number is to screen candidates.

The Sex Addition Prank

Pranks About Laws

Making up new laws is fun, and pretty easy to pull off. These ideas require more thought, though.

If playing a prank around a new law, make sure to think it all the way through. Develop a storyline and lay it out so it sustains for several hours.

Tax on Pets

Pet pranks are even better when suggesting a new law is now in effect. Among all April Fools' pranks, the pet tax prank is one of the best. This is an easy bit to pull off.

Announce that a new pet tax will go into effect on April 2. Include a reason for the tax, such as supporting the cost of a new health care reform bill. People will be fired up, and you will get calls.

Everyone is asked to self-report pets by calling a number to determine how much they owe. Warn listeners to report all pets or risk a stiff penalty.

When they call the number, reveal the prank and record their responses to playback on the air.

You could also run announcements that the station has made arrangements that allow listeners to avoid the coming Pet Tax. However, they must complete a task that day. Direct them to a website or a station promotion where the prank is revealed.

A station in Birmingham got over 600 people to sign an online petition and fill the phones protesting the law.

The Pet Tax

The Smoking Ban

Similarly, the Smoking Ban is effective because it targets a subset of the population.

Announce a ban on smoking and driving. Add drama by suggesting the Governor or Mayor enacted the law because of disturbing information showing drivers were causing accidents by smoking, lighting cigarettes and blowing smoke rings, on the way to work.

Take it further by announcing the potential public disturbances caused by dropping lit cigarettes in their laps while driving.

The fines are $50 for a first offense, $150 for the second and $500 plus mandatory jail time for the third offense.

Set up fake calls from people saying that they were busted on the way to work.

The Total Smoking Ban

This example is a little complicated but works well. Try to collaborate with city officials in advance, if possible. However, don't expect them to fully embrace this idea.

Suggest smoking has been banned entirely, or at least limited in the community. Even outdoor smoking is no longer allowed!

Some listeners will support it, but smokers will have a very strong, defensive and mostly negative reaction.

The Smoking Ban Prank

Parents of Ugly Kids

This seems like a reasonable charity, doesn't it? Sure, until you think it through.

Run commercials for the Early Life Cosmetics Center, featuring plastic surgery for babies.

Position it as a service for parents of ugly children. After all, nobody can choose a beautiful child but now we can correct what nature messed up.

This can live as a recorded event or schedule an interview with ELCC doctors and specialists who "operate on babies" to give the gift of beauty.

Parents Of Ugly Kids

Targeting Groups Of People

Pranks about certain groups can work if targeted groups are chosen carefully.

For example, a claim that a new law that bans walking cats on a leash in public targets cat people. Claiming that texting and walking on a local college campus is illegal because of "distracted walking" works. Parents of Ugly Kids is a success because there are people in that category, but it's unorganized. But choose the targeted group carefully.

However, be careful! Don't target special interest groups, ethnic organizations, etc. This usually comes off as mean-spirited or bullying. Always observe April Fools' rule #2: Have Fun.

Pranks With Public Utilities

Take care when targeted a public institution. It can be hilarious and effective, but there's also a higher risk factor.

A couple of key guidelines:

- Never use the name of the actual utility or institution. Make it generic, such as "the phone company" or "the gas company" or "the water department."

- It's best to avoid mentioning the city's name. This makes official complaints about the prank more defendable. For example, saying "the electric company" is generic but saying "Springfield's electric company" is more direct. It's harder for management to defend complaints.

Here are some ideas to adapt, targeting the water department. This is a good target because water shortages are a big issue.

Here are a couple of ideas:

- Report that high levels of H2O (water) has been discovered in the water in (your town). Run an announcement that sounds like a spot 1-2 times per hour all day from The Water Department. Warn that side effects could include headaches and diarrhea. Severe cases could result in vomiting.

- Promote that a major clog has developed in the city's sewage pipes and massive spills are likely. On behalf of the Sewage Department, ask everyone to flush the toilet at exactly 12 noon. But warn that if unable to flush at noon, all toilets should be covered with plastic wrap to prevent backup.

The Desalinization Plant

If you are in a market that's near a body of salt-water (ocean, salt lake, etc), this idea works.

Create a fake commercial from The Water Company, with announcements about that new desalinization plant. Here is sample copy:

TODAY IS THE DAY TO TEST THE NEW DESALINIZATION TREATMENT FACILITY AND TO DO SO, A RED GAS WILL BE SENT THROUGH THE PIPES AT VARIOUS TIMES ALL DAY. WE BELIEVE THAT THE GAS IS HARMLESS AND WILL HAVE VERY FEW SERIOUS SIDE EFFECTS. HOWEVER TO BE ON THE SAFE SIDE AND PROTECT YOUR FAMILY FROM POSSIBLE BRAIN DAMAGE OR LIVER DISEASE, TAKE THE PRECAUTION OF COVERING EACH FAUCET IN YOUR HOME TO COLLECT THE GAS. A BALLOON OR CONDOM IS THE RECOMMENDATION. WHEN YOU CAPTURE THE GAS, DO NOT OPEN THE CONDOM OR BALLOON. AND DO NOT FLUSH IT DOWN OUR PIPES. DISPOSE OF IT AT THE CHEMICAL TREATMENT FACILITY NEAR YOU. DO NOT ALLOW IT TO TOUCH YOUR SKIN OR CLOTHING. AGAIN THESE ARE JUST PRECAUTIONS AND WE THINK EVERYTHING WILL PROBABLY BE ALL RIGHT.

Stage calls, but don't worry about setting up that many because this will get a reaction!

The Desalinization Plant

Conclusion

April Fools' Day is a great opportunity to create a buzz in the community. I hope some of the guidelines and ideas in this eBook have inspired you and will lead to a successful and safe April 1.

Remember, each prank requires planning and preparation. Work ahead and develop the ideas for simplicity and with layers of depth to keep it going throughout your show.

There are many more April Fools' Day pranks outlined in detail for members of the Insiders Radio Network, radio's best and most valuable collection of ideas and training tools. Get a free trial and join the community here:

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