

Christmas Programming Unwrapped

Radio's Field Guide to The Holidays

BY TRACY JOHNSON

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 Introduction:
Unwrap the Power of Christmas Radio

Every year, like clockwork, pumpkins barely have time to mold on the porch before radio stations start rolling out sleigh bells and Mariah Carey. And every year, programmers ask the same question:

> **"Is it too soon? It seems early."**

Spoiler: Listeners almost never think it's too soon, except a handful who complain about everything. You know the ones. They complained to Starbucks that Pumpkin Spice has no business being served until the third week of the NFL season and McRib should always be on the McDonald's menu.

Meanwhile, Hallmark is collecting ratings and massive profits by launching Christmas movies while you're still trying to adjust to not hanging out at the beach or pool on the weekends.

The truth is, Christmas programming is one of radio's most powerful strategic tools. Done right, it can deliver monster ratings, flood your station with goodwill, and connect your brand to some of the most powerful emotions in human memory: nostalgia, joy, family, even a little magic.

Done poorly? Well, nothing says "coal in your ratings stocking" like a confused audience, burned-out talent, and a station that sounds like it's trying too hard to be the life of the office karaoke party.

The Magic Is In the Metrics

Flip to all-Christmas, and three things usually happen:

> **Cume (total audience reach) explodes**. Nielsen routinely shows audience spikes that can double or triple AQH. WLIT/Chicago once reached a 14.4 share in December. It was the biggest ratings for any station in that market since 1975.
>
> **TSL from casual (non-fan) listeners skyrockets.** New listeners who barely know your brand in July suddenly become holiday P1s, listening longer and more often.
>
> **Sure, some P1s flee**. Your regulars might groan when "Little Drummer Boy" replaces Imagine Dragons, but if the station brand is strong, they'll be back…if your core brand is strong enough.

Christmas programming is a high-wire act, and the rope is greased with eggnog.

It Works - But It's Risky

Christmas radio works because it taps into something streaming playlists can't: a shared cultural soundtrack. In a wildly divided, opinionated world, Christmas is a chance to breathe. The songs are (mostly) upbeat, bright, and happy. It makes you feel good.

Gary Fisher of Equity Communications once put it simply:

> **"Christmas music is a link to better times."**

That's the core of it. In a world full of stress, politics, and potholes, Christmas radio is a time machine for the heart. It transports listeners to a place where Burl Ives, Bing Crosby, and Mariah Carey reign supreme.

But that doesn't mean it's easy. You can't just throw a playlist together and wait for the ratings and sponsors to pour in.

Christmas is a crowded battlefield. In many markets, the "Christmas Station" is already a legacy brand. Adult Contemporary (AC) and Contemporary Christian (CCM) stations stake a claim in the space, and usually dominate. But even in the most competitive landscapes, there could be room for another contender.

In Tampa, three all-Christmas stations carved up 25 share points between them. In market after market, there's proof that the audience pie really does grow in November and December, not to mention October for the early flippers.

The downside? Entering the fray without a plan is like storming Santa's workshop without a blueprint for the toys.

It's Not a Gimmick

Critics sometimes dismiss all-Christmas as a gimmick. It was usually a stunt used by poorly-rated stations that turned on "Santa Baby" in late November as an attention-getting stunt. It was a desperate attempt to pump up the fall book and get attention for a January format flip.

But smart programmers learned and figured out there was brand value, ratings increases, and revenue opportunities beyond the short-term Cumeinfusion.

Christmas programming is not about gimmicks. It's about brand positioning. Christmas is a chance to reinforce core station values with nostalgic, family-friendly vibes. You can invite new listeners into the fold at the one time of year they're most open to trying new things. The holiday period can introduce programming and promotion benefits that carry over into the new year. And, stations generate goodwill through promotions and community service.

Christmas programming is bigger than the music. It's the mood, feel, and vibe that wraps around the tunes.

As consultant Mike McVay explains:

> **“The music is powerful, but it’s the little touches — kids on the air, soldiers saying hello, listener stories — that make people love the station.”**

Unwrap Your Christmas Programming

This is not just a song list, nor is it a grab bag of promotions and on-air ideas. You already have enough of those floating around in your inbox. You will get some new, creative inspiration, but **Christmas Programming Unwrapped** is about strategy. It’s about how to:

Decide if your station should flip, dabble, or stay Grinchy.

Build the right music mix for your brand and audience.

Coach talent to shine in the season (without burning out).

Design promotions that feel like traditions, not stunts.

Extend Christmas to digital platforms.

Convert December’s sugar rush of listening into January loyalty.

Along the way, we’ll unwrap real-world examples, best practices, and yes, a few horror stories of what not to do. (Because nothing makes you appreciate your strategy like hearing how another station face-planted with a “Grandma Got Run Over By a Reindeer” music marathon.)

Before We Dive In…

Christmas programming is about winning hearts. The ratings are the reward, but the real prize is owning the season in the minds of listeners. Think of it this way: Amazon owns online shopping. Hallmark owns Christmas movies. Do you want your station to own the soundtrack of the holidays in your market?

If the answer is yes, welcome aboard. Let's unwrap the secrets together. And if you're reading this in November? You're too late. July? Congratulations, you're on the right track. In between?

Let's go to work and make Christmas programming work for you

- Tracy Johnson

🎄 Chapter 1: How Much Is too Much? Should You Be All-In?

All-Christmas Is A High-Stakes Decision

Every year, somewhere between the last bite of pumpkin pie and the first Black Friday elbow in the electronics aisle, programmers wake up and realize it's the Holiday Season. If you're waiting until late November to decide, you've missed the window to switch to an all-Christmas theme.

Sorry, it's too late. Those stations you mocked for the last six weeks as "tone deaf-it's too early" are eating your pumpkin pie and drinking your eggnog. Santa's elves spend the whole year in the workshop making toys, and you think you can throw together a Christmas format over a weekend?

Flushing your format and flipping the switch to go All-Christmas is not a small decision. It can feel like setting off fireworks. It's a glorious, attention-grabbing, impossible-to-ignore event. It can also feel like playing with dynamite in the control studio. Handle it wrong, and you'll blow up more than just "Feliz Navidad."

The Case for Going All-In

Nielsen has been tracking holiday flips for years, and the results are almost always the same: stations that go all-in see monster ratings.

Consider:

WLIT/Chicago (Lite FM): Scored a staggering 14.4 share during one holiday book, the highest in the market since bell-bottoms were fashionable.

KOST/Los Angeles: Frequently jumps into double digits, topping 13 shares in America's second-largest market.

KOIT/San Francisco and B101/Philadelphia: Both regularly reach audience heights their competitors can only dream about, all thanks to "Jingle Bell Rock."

When done right, flipping to All-Christmas is like launching the world's cheapest, most effective external marketing campaign. Advertising is designed to attract new potential listeners, and that's what All-Christmas does. Examine the Cumeexplosion for these stations. Good luck launching a billboard, bus wrap, or TikTok dance challenge that would outperform it.

As DMR Interactive put it:

> **"Holiday music creates an influx of new Cumeunlike any other promotion. It's like an open house for your brand."**

Still, nothing in life (or radio) is a sure thing. There are pitfalls to consider.

The Risks of Playing Santa

Of course, Santa giveth and Santa taketh away. Going all-in comes with costs:

Core listener backlash: Your rock loyalists don't want "Little Drummer Boy" between AC/DC and Foo Fighters. Some will leave, and not all will return in January, especially if there's another option that suits their taste.

Brand confusion: A station still fighting to define its identity risks muddying the waters. If you're the new CHR in town, does playing Andy

Williams help or hurt your cause? Unless you're a well-established brand, you could set your brand back months for a few weeks of gains. That may be too risky.

Talent fatigue: December is a grind. Asking your airstaff to fake cheer through 24/7 sleigh bells without guidance is asking for burnout (and sloppy breaks). Programming an All-Christmas station is more than copying KOST's playlist and scheduling "Happy Holidays" imaging pieces. It demands intense execution, which requires training and active management.

One consultant summed it up best:

> **"Christmas ratings are like gorging on Christmas cookies. You get a sugar rush that feels amazing at first, but if you don't plan for the crash, January is going to hurt."**

So plan your strategy carefully and consider whether your station is properly positioned and equipped for making the All-Christmas move.

When Going All-In Makes Sense

Three attractive scenarios make All-In an appealing (and potentially profitable)option:

Enhance Your Brand: You're an established AC or CCM station targeting adults with (mostly) traditional values. Your image is crafted around being "safe to listen to," and you lean into some nostalgic themes. Congratulations, this is your Super Bowl. Flip. Claim it. Own it.

Nothing to Lose: Your station is struggling. The brand is weak, and there are few fans. Nothing is working. You are a flailing station with little to lose and much to gain. Christmas can be a Hail Mary that works, *as long as you have a plan for January*. Only launch All-Christmas if it's part of a strategy to capitalize on it. Oh, and you

Author's Notes: Tracy Johnson

I've spent most of my career helping radio stations connect with audiences through emotion, not just data, strategy, or playlists, and there's no better way to do it than Christmas.

Every year, I'm reminded how powerful this medium can be when it leans into its humanity. During the holidays, we strip away the noise and get back to the basics, making people feel something. That's when the magic happens. It happens in the moments that make listeners laugh, cry, sing, and remember why they love radio in the first place.



This book is for the people who make that happen. The programmers who obsess over rotations until midnight. The imaging producers who somehow make sleigh bells sound fresh every year. The personalities who find new ways to tell old stories. The promotion directors who pull off miracles on shoestring budgets. And everyone else who pours creativity, patience, and heart into making the holidays come alive through speakers, smart devices, and streaming apps everywhere. It's more than entertainment with a dial position. It's companionship.

Christmas programming is a gift for your audience. But when it's done right, it's also a gift you give yourself, a reminder of why you got into this business to begin with.

So, to everyone who keeps the lights on, the jingles rolling, and the magic alive: thank you, and Merry Christmas.

Tracy Johnson