

Game uses interactivity and technology to move radio promotions into a new era

Crack The Code

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—Shawn Smith

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When Momentum Media Marketing president Shawn Smith received a demo for the “Crack the Code” radio promotion about three years ago, he played with the interactive game for a while, then started pacing around his office. ■ Smith was thinking about ways to extend the game—which asks users to enter a four-number sequence with a phone keypad until they guess the correct number—to online. He had received the demo courtesy of its creator, U.K.-based Rasprodz director Richard Spears.

The idea to use more interactivity for games on the radio occurred to Spears in 1997, while working as an imaging producer at a Brisbane, Australia, AM gold station. As he was creating yet another promo for “The Phrase That Pays,” he started “thinking about how listeners could use their phones in more creative ways,” by using Dual-Tone Multi-Frequency (DTMF) phone tones.

By the time it launched in the United States earlier this year, “Crack the Code” had already made an impressive debut at Johannesburg AC station Highveld Stereo in January 2004, blending traditional contesting with the excitement of gaming. International markets including London, Sydney and Dublin followed, and “Crack the Code” was named the best new media initiative at the 2007 European Radio Awards at the NAB conference in Barcelona.

Smith was impressed by “Crack the Code” because of its sophisticated approach to contesting and high production values. “Most stations still rely on theater of the mind and a stack of carts to create suspense in on-air gaming, and in the age of Xbox, Wii and PlayStation, listeners can spot a fake a mile away.”

The game uses DTMF telephone technology and patent-pending software to allow listeners to interact with the on-air game in real time using virtually any telephone touch-tone key pad, Smith says. “Based on listener input, the appropriate production elements are fired automatically, freeing personalities to focus on being great personalities.”

The software randomly generates the winning numbers and not even station personnel know the code until a listener deciphers it.

Smith was considering a U.S. launch for “Crack the Code” when he received a phone call from his friend Gary Thompson, PD of classic rock KDBN (the Bone)/Dallas. Thompson needed a spring 2008 promotion that had never been done before.

“It’s so completely unique, both in on-air production value and execution, as well as the online game to support it,” Thompson says. Station management also had a positive reaction to the promotion.

According to Smith, once the Bone presented “Crack the Code” to advertisers, it was able to sell “14 of 16 nonspot packages a week before air,” which more than covered the cost of the yearly license fee.

The Bone’s agreement with Momentum gave it a market-exclusive license to air the game, feature it online and play it on remote for two ratings periods for up to eight weeks each, for a maximum of 16 weeks during the year. The game could be played up to five times daily during weekdays.

“Momentum also provided an in-studio computer and software interface, all music and production beds, Web game and sales materials” in addition to any consultations the Bone needed to get the game started, Smith says.

All of Momentum’s customized sales materials “were exceptionally well-produced and effective. We were all shocked at how quickly we sold it,” Thompson says.

Although Bone staffers were initially intimidated by “Crack the Code,” after the first week they warmed up to the process and it became the first topic of conversation between jocks off-air. The station’s listeners immediately loved it and Thompson was “blown away by how many people played in each round. I also expected there to be a rather

steep learning curve, but they got it right away.”

Thompson and Bone staffers set appointments weekdays at 7:20 a.m., 12:20 p.m. and 5:20 p.m. for listeners to play the game, which officially debuted April 15. “The ‘Crack the Code’ computer listened ‘live’ to listeners as they entered their sequence of four different numbers on the phone.” Once the numbers were selected, “an elegant British lady repeated each number as it was entered. If the contestant entered the correct sequence of numbers, they opened the vault and the cash was theirs.” Only the “Crack the Code” computer knew the correct sequence and in order to guess it, listeners had to keep track of all of the numbers played in each round of the game. Plus, Thompson says, “Crack the Code” sounded “awesome” on air.

The Bone was responsible for any prizes it gave winners. “We started each game with a different cash value, then changed it as the game progressed,” Thompson says. “A standard game averaged 11 plays for us, so about every three-



and-a-half days we had a winner.”

The station was random with cash amounts, ranging from \$930 to \$5,093 so that “listeners never knew what it was going to be next.”

After the success of “Crack the Code” at the Bone, Smith has been on the road pitching the game. Astral Media hot AC CKFM-FM (Virgin Radio 999)/Toronto will air the contest next as part of its first major ratings initiative starting Sept. 29.

“Our real competitors are not other stations—rather, [they’re] other mediums. ‘Crack the Code’ gives stations an opportunity to create an interactive experience in three places: on-air, online and on-remote by playing the game at sponsor locations on a laptop.”

Although “Crack the Code” remains Rasprodz’s star performer, the company has other products that showcase its philosophy. “We’ve always believed that the technology and the idea of listeners controlling what’s happening on the air with their phone is the all-important part—not so much the games,” Spears says. “That’s why we have a patent pending on the method and technology.”

Since Spears doesn’t want to create only number-based games, the company is working on a game called “Snapster.” Based on a card game called “Snap,” it uses two callers and has an application that turns a radio station into a virtual iPod where listeners can control which song is played next live on the air using their keypads.

Thompson says that although it was tough to tell what impact “Crack the Code” had on ratings because the Bone was changing other elements at the same time, he plans to continue using it. “I would expect to see the greatest benefit from our fall 2008 and spring 2009 books.”

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