



Guest Column: Vision 20/21 Featuring NPR CMO Michael Smith

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2020 is not even halfway through and it already has been one of the most intense years in history, with events ranging from a global pandemic to economic instability to civil unrest. Yet, there's a sense of optimism in the air as history has proven many times over that periods of disruption often precede times of great innovation. Vision 20/21 is a series of conversations-conducted by Carson Hood, executive producer at New York City-based creative agency Bigstar - that sets out to bottle this moment in time by asking experts to assess the entertainment landscape and provide educated predictions of what's to come in the key areas of entertainment and marketing.

In this first Q&A, Hood talks to NPR Chief Marketing Officer Michael Smith about working in quarantine, how to market media in turbulent times and how NPR is working to attract younger listeners.

Bigstar's Carson Hood: I really appreciate you agreeing to be a part of this. Why don't you tell us a little bit about yourself and how quarantine life has looked for you?

NPR's Michael Smith: I currently am the chief marketing officer for NPR, which I started in the beginning of April. It's a mixed blessing being in quarantine and

starting a new job, which is great, but then you have 30 million other people who have lost their jobs. It's also sort of needed in the sense that I've started a job where I was immediately forced to work remotely. So that's kind of surreal, in a way, but we've made the best of it. And we've still been producing really great work. It's been going as well as possible given the circumstances.

CH: What was the first Zoom with your team like and what were the key objectives you wanted to communicate to them?

MS: I think the first step was to just let them know that my main concern was their health and safety and their emotional well-being. To [tell them] that my leadership strategy is really all about servant leadership, which is about putting employees and the people that work with you first, and being a resource and facilitator for their success. So, I talked a lot about my philosophy as a leader, and really not at all about objectives or strategies or business things that we would be trying to do. But my attitude was [that] the seat has been open for a little while and you have been operating fantastically well before I got here. I'm going to take time to just learn and absorb the organization and learn more about you and figure out how I can help accentuate what you do.

CH: And that's all within the first 6-8 weeks.

MS: Yeah, I'm starting to lean in a little bit more now into specific decisions and strategies. The overall meta strategy for NPR is that there are two huge factors affecting our business: the change in platform of people moving from traditional analog radio to digital on demand audio consumption and the second being the change in audience demographics as America becomes more diverse. We have a brand that is primarily anchored in terrestrial radio serving an older demographic-our median listener ages about 56, 57-and we need to evolve our business into a digital/audio-on-demand type business that serves the next generation of listeners who are younger and more diverse than our traditional audience.

CH: NPR spans a lot of categories. Is there an area that you're going to focus on first?

MS: Spanning a lot of categories goes back to the founding mission of NPR, which was written back in 1970 by Bill Siemering, NPR's first programming director. It reads: "National Public Radio will serve the individual: it will promote personal growth; it will regard individual differences with respect and joy rather than derision and hate; it will celebrate the human experience as infinitely varied rather than vacuous and banal; it will encourage a sense of active constructive participation, rather than apathetic helplessness."

It's a much more expansive idea of what NPR has become. We wrap around a person and touch many aspects of their lives through storytelling, with the goal of making them a more informed and more productive citizen.

While people may know us most from the news brand, I think that we see ourselves as much bigger than that. That's why when talking about things like the coffee club that we launched, we look at (the brand) in a variety of ways, whether it's comedy, through pop culture, shows, science and information-everything from Hidden Brain to Wow in the World to Life Kit.

CH: What about platforms? Are there any you will focus on?

MS: I don't think there's one single platform [on which we will focus], it's more what will serve the goal of helping us get a younger and more diverse audience. It's clear that you're going to find that audience more on digital platforms. You mentioned the podcasts, that's definitely an area of focus. YouTube [is] an area that has been really successful for us with, especially with our Tiny Desk concert series, which has really exploded in the last three or four years on YouTube. I think we're going to continue to focus on making content for podcasting and for YouTube and maybe even TikTok and explore other social platforms as a way to reach younger and more diverse listeners.

CH: Any insight you would want to share around the growth of the platforms like YouTube and TikTok and the digital content space as a whole?

MS: Well, I think that the podcasting area has been something that, you know, we sort of stumbled into 10, 12 years ago, and it's just been something that has grown incredibly and we've leaned into it and the results have been fantastic. I think our overall podcast listening has more than doubled in the last four years. So whether it's How I Built This or TED Radio Hour or Planet Money or Hidden Brain, they're just all doing very, very well. We've been able to extend the NPR news brand into a daily podcast habit.

The other thing that's great about podcasting is the audience. Our main audience is in their mid- to late 50s, on average, but our podcast audience is about 20 years younger than that. So podcasting has done a really great job of getting a younger audience for us. We still are challenged with getting a more diverse audience and increasing our awareness is going to be a key focus. Our research says that NPR's awareness is relatively low for a news brand, especially among people of color. About 55% of people of color have never heard of NPR. So we feel good that if we introduce them to NPR, they'll like what they see and the variety of content. We have shows like Code Switch, which is all about race in America, and shows that are hosted by diverse reporters like It's Been a Minute with Sam Sanders and Hidden Brain with Shankar Vedantam. I think it's just a matter of getting the content in front of people. That's one of the reasons why marketing is going to be a big focus for us.

CH: What are you most excited about or optimistic for moving forward?

MS: Well, I think the exciting thing is that whenever there's external pressure challenges or crises the entertainment business seems to always react well to it

because they're learning. At our core, we're all very creative people and it's always fun to see the different ways we'll adapt. The perfect example is all the ways people are now shooting things from home 100% remotely.

There's always new kinds of creative ways of doing things and solving problems that come out of these things, and sometimes they can become lasting creative trends. I think about the writers' strike back in the late 1980s when I was first getting into the business. People started to experiment with making full-length TV shows out of video. Rescue 911 on CBS launched that season in '89. Cops and America's Funniest Home Videos also both launched in the fall season in 1989, and it really signaled a sea change in television. Now when you watch television, obviously, it's shot on video and reality is an enduring genre, but people forget that really came out of the crisis of the writers' strike.

CH: Is there one that you feel like might stick? Can I put you on the spot and get a bonus prediction?

MS: Yeah, I think the low-tech sort of shot from home I think, you know, what TikTok does. Like John Krasinski's Some Good News where it's low tech, but celebrities are going directly to you in a very intimate way. I think that might stick versus the idea that you've got to have this level of production value. Maybe for some things, just get it out there and people are fine with it.

CH: This one is for our friends out there that maybe unfortunately have been laid off due to everything going on. So if you could, what are your recommendations for them? Or is there a platform you would encourage them to check out?

MS: In terms of platforms, there's one called ExecThread. They are a startup that started a couple years ago. It's like a membership community where they aggregate job listings from headhunters and insiders. For example, if you have been approached by a headhunter about a job or maybe you heard about a job interview for a job that you didn't want, you can contribute that information. You get credits for how many leads you contribute and then you use those credits to pay for your subscription for the site and see other leads from other people. So it's a really interesting community, because so many of the jobs are not traditionally posted jobs that you wouldn't find on Indeed.com.