

Standing Apart

NETH FM is one of Sri Lanka's youngest radio stations. It operates in an area of keen competition to establish itself as the station of choice for Sinhala-speaking listeners. Anisha Niyas spoke to Nihal Seneviratne Epa, Chairman of Asset Radio Broadcasting, to find out what makes NETH FM stand apart.



NETH FM is a Sinhala-language radio channel that offers infotainment

and is on air 24 hours a day. What was the reason for launching a radio channel with that concept?

When we started doing research on the existing radio channels we realised that most of the programmes being aired were poor in quality and not very educational to the public. We wanted to give something useful to our listeners. There was a gap in the market and we wanted to make use of it. We looked at what could make us stand apart and we were able to achieve that goal successfully. With a competitive environment we wanted to have our channel operating for 24 hours.

What is the demographic you are targeting?

Although we are targeting a young demographic, between 18 and 35 years of age, we consider ourselves to be a family oriented channel as well.

What kind of programmes do you broadcast?

We have a variety of programmes including radio dramas, game shows, chart shows and educational programmes. We also give information on topics such as health, the motor industry, social activities - whatever is of interest to our listeners. The religious programme every Sunday at 0800hrs is the most popular one with our base. The main thing is to add value to every programme that we broadcast to our listeners.

Have you carried out research to ensure that the programmes NETH FM broadcasts cater to the diverse taste of listeners?

We have a separate research team to ensure that our listeners are satisfied. Our aim is to be interactive with listeners to make sure that we know what they want to listen to. We always want to enhance the quality of the taste of our listeners.

There are 18 radio channels catering to the same demographic - the Sinhala speaking public. Is it very competitive or do these radio channels focus on niche markets?

It is very competitive because all the radio channels have gone down the same path. The quality of programming is low. What we are trying to do is differentiate ourselves from that. Listeners have realised that there is a big difference between our competitors and us.

“The concept is based on infotainment where we can provide our listeners with the best information and entertainment available.”

What is the difference?

When we started NETH FM everyone told us that there was no gap in the market for another radio channel and that we could not offer anything new to the public in terms of programmes. Although at that time there were 18 radio channels catering to Sinhala-speakers, we discovered that there was a clear gap between the existing private channels and Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation (SLBC). SLBC airs conventional programmes, whereas private FM channels focus on interacting with their base. We saw a gap where even private FM channels were not meeting quality standards, especially in the presentation style. We focused on quality. Language and presentation style are important to us. We never broadcast any song that is harmful to society or the image of the country. We pride ourselves in being socially responsible. We are the first private radio channel that introduced a Code of Ethics to a radio channel in Sri Lanka.

Tell us about the concept of ‘first to inform and best of entertainment.’ How have you converted that concept into reality?

The concept is based on “infotainment” where we provide our listeners with the best information and entertainment available. With all our programming we make note of what kind of music listeners want to listen to at a particular time and slot it into time segments. So in the morning, we will play a certain genre of music, which would be completely different to what is played in the evening. On the news and information segment we have developed a good news team, which is spread across the island. We have built strong relationships within the team so that they are loyal to us.

How do you keep the audience informed with accurate news updates?

We have our own news team as well as 75 provincial news correspondents. We think they are the best in their field. Training and development is vital in this industry so we brought down our provincial news correspondents to Colombo and had several workshops with them. It is an on-going process and they were very happy with us. We were the first privately owned radio channel to invite correspondents to Colombo and provide them with training. We have built up loyalty with them. So we have gained something from what we have given them.

We are very particular about the accuracy of any information we receive. At the end of the day, we are responsible for what goes on air. So as soon as we get breaking news from our provincial news correspondents we make sure that our news teams checks it for accuracy.

What is “On Line News & Breaking News”?

Other channels have news broadcasts on an hourly basis. We don't stick that norm. We break into regular programmes and broadcast news as soon as we receive it. We want our listeners be the first to have access to whatever is happening in the country. The only difference is that in “On line news” we do not disturb the listener. We always wait until the end of the song or whatever is playing at that time. That is our edge when compared to other radio stations.

What is the feedback from listeners?

The feedback from listeners has been excellent. We are currently the fastest growing radio channel. We are also the first to get ratings during our test transmissions. Within the first three months of launching NETH FM in November 2005, we got a rating of 2.7. On the subsequent three months we got a rating of 4.2. This is after averaging it island wide. So in reality, we have about 7 if considered only for our transmission areas. Today, our listenership is 1.3 Million. We don't have island wide coverage yet. We have two transmitting stations in Magalakanda and Gongala in the frequency levels of 105.9FM and 93.9FM. We cover the Western, Southern, North Western and Central provinces. Actually, we cover about 70% of Sinhala-speaking radio listeners. We hope to cover the other areas within the next three to four months.

What kind of technology do you use?

We use modern technology in the broadcasting of our programmes. Our state-of-the-art equipment includes digital struder mixers - these are the best in the world. We have a facility known as selective casting that none of the other radio stations have. We can give a song to listeners in the south through our transmitting station at Deniyaya, and simultaneously have normal programming broadcast to our listeners in Colombo. In addition, our studios are fully automated. If we want we can even run the radio without a single DJ.

What is Asset Radio Broadcasting?

Asset Radio Broadcasting is the company that has the licence to broadcast NETH FM. It is 100% SriLankan owned company. We also have a subsidiary company that has a TV licence and we are planning to start NETH TV by the end of this year.

