

Rock 'n' radio rumble

A dust-up involving Clear Channel and a Blink-182 concert in Cincinnati doesn't seem to be an isolated event.

By Eric Boehlert

August 08, 2001 | In an antitrust suit filed this week, Denver promotion company Nobody in Particular Presents claims that Clear Channel Communications uses its concerts division and radio stations to team up against local competitors. A recent dust-up in Cincinnati suggests that such behavior is not limited to Denver.

MCA punk/pop band Blink-182 performed July 9 at Cincinnati's Riverbend Music Center amphitheater, which is operated by Clear Channel. Weeks before the show Clear Channel's local promoter asked local rock stations WAQZ (owned by Infinity Broadcasting) and WEBN (owned by Clear Channel) to submit a proposal if they wanted to sponsor, or present, the show.

For radio stations, particularly rock stations, landing "presents" (e.g., "WAQZ presents Blink-182 live in Cincinnati") is a critical branding mechanism, a way to reinforce among listeners that the station is more than just a jukebox with commercials. The battle over "presents" can often get complicated, with competing stations vying for the spot. The competition is even more complicated if concert promoter giant Clear Channel owns one of the stations.

In the case of Blink-182 that was not a problem; WEBN's audience skews older than the band's audience and the Clear Channel station wasn't playing its new single at the time. So it passed on the sponsorship, leaving it to competitor WAQZ, which promised to promote the show and run a certain number of on-air announcements. (Actually, according to a WAQZ source, when it became apparent that WEBN was not interested in the date, the Clear Channel concerts division went back to WAQZ and asked that the station increase its promotional budget for the Blink-182 show at Riverbend because it wouldn't look good to the Clear Channel corporate office if the local office simply gave the sponsorship to a competitor based on its low initial bid.) According to sources involved in the incident, days before the show Randy Michaels, president of Clear Channel's radio division, a renowned micromanager who happens to live in the Cincinnati area, became upset when he found out a competitor had exclusive "presents" to the Blink-182 show. Michaels contacted executives at MCA Records and urged them to take away WAQZ's exclusive "presents" and to make the show neutral, meaning that all local rock stations could sponsor the show and give away promotional material at the concert. MCA declined. The night of the show, a WAQZ disc jockey, onstage to announce the band, led the crowd through a few chants of "EBN sucks" -- a typical stunt in today's often sophomoric radio wars. The next morning WAQZ was told that it was banned from promotional activities at Riverbend, as well as banned from other local Clear Channel concert venues, essentially clearing the way for WEBN to snatch up future rock concert "presents." Clear Channel also threatened to pull its \$50,000 advertising account from WAQZ.

Turning his wrath on MCA, Michaels reportedly threatened to yank the label's band Blink-182 off Clear Channel stations. Clear Channel controls roughly 60 percent of rock listening in America today. MCA executives declined to comment, as did representatives for the band. A spokesman for Clear Channel said he could "find no evidence that [threats] occurred."

Steve Smith, executive vice president and COO of Clear Channel Entertainment, confirms that WAQZ was banned for "inappropriate actions" (i.e., the "EBN sucks" chant), and insists that if a WEBN jockey had used the same kind of language onstage, the Clear Channel station would have been banned from the concert venue as well. Following the Blink-182 incident, WAQZ was also told that the phrase "WAQZ presents" would not be included in print ads promoting a local Crystal Method show. Clear Channel's Smith insists the station was never given an exclusive "presents." A station source says that's not true, that it did have the "presents" and that the wording was dropped from ads following the Blink-182 controversy.

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About the writer

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