

# HOW TO LAUNCH YOUR OWN LOW POWER FM STATION

THE GUIDEBOOK



This is it ... the moment we've all been waiting for! On Oct. 15–29, 2013, the Federal Communications Commission will accept applications for new low power FM radio stations. LPFM stations operate at a maximum power of 100 watts and reach listeners within a range of three to five miles — though their impact extends well beyond that.

The FCC launched the noncommercial LPFM service in 2000 after a grassroots movement pushed the agency to diversify the radio dial. Today there are more than 800 LPFM stations on the air. These stations are run by schools, community centers, civil rights groups, churches, farm-worker organizations and many other nonprofit organizations. LPFM stations showcase a broad range of programming — everything from science fiction stories to zydeco music to medical call-in shows to exposés of modern-day slavery in agricultural fields.

Unfortunately, as the FCC started to license new stations, Congress put the brakes on the process — thanks to pressure from the corporate radio industry. Congress instituted restrictions that made it impossible for the FCC to issue licenses in most urban areas. In the ensuing decade, the Prometheus Radio Project, Free Press and others pushed Congress to reopen the airwaves.

And we won. Thanks to the passage of the Local Community Radio Act, which President Obama signed into law in 2011, the FCC will once again issue new LPFM licenses. The FCC will accept applications online from Oct. 15–29, 2013. This is a one-time golden opportunity for communities to own a valuable slice of the media — and for organizations to expand their influence and impact.

Linking to a variety of valuable resources, this handy guide walks you through the process of applying for a license and starting a station.

Seize the airwaves!



# A Guidebook for Low Power Community Radio Applicants

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# I. Planning Your Community Radio Station

Use these steps to begin developing your low power community radio station.

## 1. Find out if you qualify.

There are a number of requirements you'll need to meet to start a low power FM (LPFM) radio station.

- **A radio frequency must be available** in your area. You can see if there's an available space by searching [tinyurl.com/lpfmsearch](https://www.fcc.gov/licenses/individual-licenses/individual-licenses-search) or [radiospark.org/rfree](https://radiospark.org/rfree).
- To apply for a low power radio license, you must be:
  - **A state-recognized nonprofit organization.** Applicants must be organizational entities and cannot be individuals. However, applicants do not need to be 501(c)(3) organizations.
  - **Local.** According to the Federal Communications Commission, applicants must have either a headquarters within 10 miles (20 miles if you're based outside the top 50 markets) of the transmitting antenna or 75 percent of board members residing within that same range.
  - **Noncommercial and educational.** Stations can accept underwriting from local businesses but may not air advertising. The FCC's definition of educational is broad — you can educate your community about environmental issues, local news, hip-hop music or anything else, as long as it's not for profit.

Your organization's board of directors is legally responsible for your radio license. Here are some additional criteria the FCC considers.

- **Criteria for the Board of Directors:**
  - Directors cannot control another broadcast license, daily newspaper or cable television system.<sup>1</sup>
  - Eighty percent or more of the directors of your organization must be U.S. citizens.
  - Directors cannot have any immediate family members (parents, children, siblings or spouses) who control other broadcast stations or daily newspapers in the area.<sup>2</sup>
  - Directors cannot have problematic character issues that were unresolved or resolved adversely in other broadcast-application proceedings.
  - Directors cannot have been found guilty of any of the following: felonies, mass media-related antitrust or unfair competition violations, fraudulent statements to other governmental units, or discrimination. Directors also cannot have any drug convictions that led to the denial of federal benefits.<sup>3</sup>
  - Directors cannot have engaged in the unlicensed operation of a radio station.

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1 There are some exceptions to this rule, especially for universities, but we advise you to work with a lawyer on them. For example, if the license holder has a multifaceted mission (e.g., a university) and some members of the board have a controlling interest in other media, such board members could recuse themselves from decisions related to the station.

2 See FCC Form 318 Worksheet 1A for details and exceptions.

3 If you cannot check this box, you will need to file an exhibit explaining the circumstances (see Form 318, question 7).

## 2) Consider the costs.

Good news! Applying for a low power radio license is free. However, most applicants in urban areas will need to pay an engineer to help them complete the application, and these fees can range from \$500–3,000. The start-up costs for a station average around \$10,000, but fortunately you have plenty of time (up to three years) after you win a license before you need to build your station. The ease or difficulty of fundraising depends partly on the value your station will have to your community, so that's why you should first ...

## 3) Find out what kind of station your community needs.

Think you're ready for your own radio show? Press pause, Casey Kasem! There's a lot to do before you spin your first record. To build a station that will sustain long-term community support, you need to find out what kind of station will best serve your community. This kind of analysis needs to take place before you plan your programming.

- **Understand your community.** What are the demographics of the area you hope to serve? What populations live in the area, and what issues matter? Do some "community mapping" to determine who's in your target audience. Consider hosting a meeting to ask your neighbors about issues that matter to them, and attend meetings of other local organizations to learn more.
- **Understand your local media landscape.** What's missing in your local media? Maybe you already have two college stations, but no Spanish-language stations. Maybe you have great jazz programming but no local news. Figure out what kinds of news, information, music, and cultural programming people are looking for.
- **Reach out to other community groups.** Consider collaborating with other organizations from the communities you want to serve. Who needs to be involved to make your station a success? Reach out early so key stakeholders can help shape the vision for your community station.
- **Look at other [community radio stations](http://prometheusradio.org/stationprofiles)** (prometheusradio.org/stationprofiles). Every community is different, but checking out other stations (or even going for a visit!) will be helpful.

## 4) Craft the vision and mission for your station.

Once you've explored your community and its needs, you're ready to craft a mission statement. The mission should be no more than two or three sentences and should communicate the station's big-picture purpose. Having a clear mission early on will help when it's time to plan your programming or fundraise. Check out [prometheusradio.org/missions](http://prometheusradio.org/missions) for some sample mission statements.

# II. Fundraising

Even though you won't need to pay for all of your station's start-up costs right away, it's important to start fundraising early, even before you get your license. For one thing, fundraising is one way to gauge the level of community support for your station. Below are some tips on how to fundraise.

## 1. Define your goals.

Before you start asking your friends, family, and other donors for money, you should have an idea of how much money you need to raise and what you will use it for.

- **You'll have to raise initial funds of at least \$10,000** for a typical LPFM station. This cost depends on the kind of antenna you will need, rental costs in your area, the quality of equipment you purchase, etc. But note that you won't need to purchase any equipment until you receive a construction permit from the FCC. Craft a budget and fundraising plan, and build recurring expenses into your budget. This might cover rent, utilities, equipment repairs, music licensing, etc.
- **People want to know why they should donate.** Provide prospective donors with a plan or at least an idea of what to expect from your project and organization. What will donors get out of supporting your station?
- **Give your best guess.** It's important to have a basic idea of how much funding you need and what you need it for. If necessary, you can always follow up again later for additional funds.
- **What will happen to the money if you do not get a station license?** Let supporters know where their money will go if the FCC doesn't approve your application. Will you direct these donations to a community fund? Will you use it to support other community media outlets in the area?

## 2. Start early.

Most of the fundraising you need to do should be handled early in the process.

- **Start raising money** as soon as you decide to start an LPFM.
- **Open a bank account** for your organization.
- **Register for a PayPal or other online payment-receiving service** so that people can donate online at their convenience.
- To be eligible for many grants and to allow donors a tax exemption on their donations, you will need to incorporate as a nonprofit with your state and get federal 501(c)(3) status. However, you can ask another organization to serve as a fiscal sponsor when you're just getting started.

### 3. Ask often.

The best way to *get* donations is to *ask* for donations!

- **Ask in person.** Asking in person puts a face on your project and reminds people that the radio station will be a people-powered organization.
- **Develop an email list.** Collect email addresses from everyone you meet. Then cultivate these contacts as potential volunteers/participants — and donors! Send emails no more than once a month to keep people informed and solicit donations.
- **Keep in touch with people.** People like to know where their money is going, so update donors about your progress. Did you just buy microphones? Did you start building your studio? Did the FCC grant your license? Let people know, and gently remind them to donate to keep your work going.
- **Don't get discouraged.** You'll probably hear "no" more often than "yes." But don't take it personally — people will give when they can and especially if they believe it's for a good cause. Your job is to prove that your station deserves people's support.

### 4. Think small.

Small donations add up quickly. While it might be tempting for your organization to seek grants, it'll take less time and effort to obtain smaller donations.

- **Most people find it easier to give \$5 than \$100.** It's better to ask as many people as you can for \$5 contributions rather than reach out to a small number of people for \$100 donations.
- **Most donors can afford to make many small donations over a long period of time.** You'll need money for initial start-up costs, but sustainability is also very important. It's easier for many donors to give \$5 a month rather than a lump sum of \$60 once a year. By signing people up as sustaining donors, you're also more likely to keep them as donors over the long term.

### 5. Be flexible.

Make it simple and easy for people to donate to your radio station. Develop a plan to receive funds, sign up with an online-donation service (like PayPal), and have a streamlined method of processing donations.

- **If it's too complicated to donate, people won't.** Accept credit cards, cash, checks, or other forms of money.
- **Designate a financial team.** Select someone to manage donations and station finances. Choose someone who knows how to manage money securely and effectively. If finances are treated professionally, donors will be more likely to give on a recurring basis.
- **Be accessible.** Potential donors aren't likely to seek you out to make a donation. When they do, however, make sure you give them the tools they need. Consider providing your personal phone number or email address.

## 6. Get creative.

There are hundreds of ways to encourage people to donate to your organization. Use any method you possibly can — it's important to be resourceful!

- **Create a fun event that will draw a crowd.** Host a kickball tournament with a \$3 participation fee. Have a nice dinner at your house and charge \$10 per person. Host an arts-and-crafts night to build a “cardboard studio” and ask people to donate so you can replace each paper item with its real-life counterpart (as WGXC in Catskill, N.Y., did: [tinyurl.com/wgxc-catskill](http://tinyurl.com/wgxc-catskill)).
- **Record a sample of your programming.** Record an hour of your programming and sell the resulting CD for a nominal fee. It'll bring in a small amount of money while promoting your station's sound.
- Nonprofit fundraising guru Kim Klein has a great document ([tinyurl.com/kh5xhz3](http://tinyurl.com/kh5xhz3)) that lists **55 ways to make \$500**. Many of these are simple and fast to implement.

## 7. Be your own donor.

Don't forget to invest your own money in your station.

- **Set an example** for volunteers and potential donors. Make a small (or large!) donation to this venture.

# III. The Application Process

The LPFM application-filing window opens in October 2013, and you can find the [application](http://application.tinyurl.com/ksk7y9r) ([tinyurl.com/ksk7y9r](http://tinyurl.com/ksk7y9r)) on the FCC website. The steps below outline the application process.

## 1. Get to know the process.

- **Get comfortable with the FCC website.** This is where you'll apply when the FCC opens the filing window.
- **Sign up** to receive LPFM updates from the Prometheus Radio Project ([prometheusradio.org/getradio](http://prometheusradio.org/getradio)).
- **Review the application requirements** at [prometheusradio.org/checklist](http://prometheusradio.org/checklist).

## 2. Enlist an engineer.

Applying for an LPFM license is a bit like doing your taxes. If your situation is straightforward, you may be able to handle it on your own. If it's complicated, you'll need to hire a professional.

For example, if you live in a rural area where there is an available frequency that's not too close to any neighboring stations, you may be able to handle the application process on your own. But if you want to base your station in an urban area with a crowded radio market, you may need to hire an engineer who can produce a special exhibit for your application.

- First, do a channel search using the free open source software at [radiospark.org/rfree](http://radiospark.org/rfree) (you will need to create a RadioSpark profile). The software will tell you whether there's an open channel in your area (marked in green) or a channel that requires a special waiver (marked in yellow). Most yellow channels will require the services of an engineer.



- Find an engineer who has applied for a broadcast license/construction permit before. This engineer should be familiar with the FCC’s requirements for applicants. You can find a list of available engineers at [radiospark.org](http://radiospark.org) under “resources.” Engineers will be busy as the application window approaches, so ask for help early!
- Even if you have an available channel that does not require a waiver, you may still want an engineer. A good engineer will help you find the “best” frequencies in your area (i.e., those that are least likely to experience interference with other stations, and those that best reach your target audience). An engineer will be able to help you directly pinpoint where your antenna should be placed, and may be able to secure you permission to locate your antenna on a tower or building.
- To reduce engineering costs (which average between \$500–3,000), apply to the Prometheus Radio Project’s Torchbearer Program. Prometheus will help with basic engineering assessments for these groups, which should reduce your engineering fees.

### 3) Apply for your LPFM construction permit.

When the application window is open, you can apply for a construction permit using an online form on the FCC’s website. Winning the construction permit is the first step in getting a license, which is awarded once you are ready to broadcast.

- Log on to [this webpage](http://thiswebpage.tinyurl.com/mcgk5en) (tinyurl.com/mcgk5en) to **create a profile on the FCC’s Consolidated Database System (CDBS)**.
- See [prometheusradio.org/checklist](http://prometheusradio.org/checklist) for the application requirements.
- **Work on the application form** and save a draft for submission in October. It’s very important to **prepare your application information well ahead of time** — the FCC’s application window is open for only a few days.
- Be as comprehensive and detailed as possible! Double-check everything and never lie to the FCC. Misrepresentations and errors will get your application dismissed.

### 4) Be prepared to negotiate with competitors.

- Once the applications are in, the FCC will **divide up the applicant pool** into “**singletons**” (i.e., applicants with no competitors for the same frequency) and “**MX groups**” (i.e., groups of two or more competing applicants who are “mutually exclusive,” meaning their applications overlap and the FCC can grant only one). Singletons (usually in rural areas) are processed first.
- There are several ways to resolve an MX group competition. Applicants can leave the MX group by switching to another open frequency. You’ll likely need an engineer to help.
- To select a winner in an MX group, the FCC awards points for various criteria (see [prometheusradio.org/checklist](http://prometheusradio.org/checklist)). You win the license if your application has the most points.
- If multiple groups are tied with an equal number of points, applicants may **develop a time-share agreement, ask a group to withdraw** from the pool, or file a **petition to deny**, which disputes the validity of another applicant’s application. If your group cannot resolve the situation on your own, the FCC will force a time-share agreement. Collaboration among groups is encouraged as it results in the most voices on the air.
- Once the FCC (and/or your fellow MX-ers) decides how best to work out any time-sharing agreements, **you will be granted a construction permit**. This permit is good for 18 months, which gives you time to build your radio station. You may request an extension for up to three years. If the station is not built in three years’ time, the FCC will take the permit back. Once you build your station, you trade your permit for a broadcast license!

## IV. Build Your Organization

It can take months and sometimes years for the FCC to award licenses, but there's a lot of work to do in the meantime. As you wait for the FCC to act, it's a good time to start developing your organization.

- Check out [this simple yet powerful document](https://tinyurl.com/lzjwgh) (tinyurl.com/lzjwgh) from Prometheus Radio Project alum Amanda Huron on organizing your station. Who will make decisions for the station? Developing a clear governance structure early on will prevent big problems in the future. Check out the [Prometheus governance handbook](https://tinyurl.com/mhd7rrv) (tinyurl.com/mhd7rrv).
- Whether or not you have the funding to employ a staff, you'll still need lots of volunteers to produce programming, participate in events, and hang out at the station and give it life. **Recruit people by any means possible:** flyers, word of mouth, PSAs on radio and PEG TV stations, etc. Go to [Energize, Inc.'s volunteer recruitment and motivation page](https://tinyurl.com/d7dcjvf) (tinyurl.com/d7dcjvf) to find helpful resources.
- **Develop a plan for training, managing, and retaining the volunteers you recruit.** Consult [this guide from Idealist](https://tinyurl.com/6tcps64) (tinyurl.com/6tcps64) on ways to manage your organization's volunteers.
- Develop a shared vision for your station among everyone involved. You can use the Prometheus Radio Project's [popular education tools](https://tinyurl.com/prp-poped) to initiate conversation and critical thinking about your station (tinyurl.com/prp-poped).

## V. Expenses for Your LPFM Station

Chances are you're somewhat strapped for cash. Even with basic equipment, however, you can still have a high-quality broadcast. Below are some tips on getting the most out of your money.

### 1. Startup expenses

Your only initial costs in applying for an LPFM station are the fees you may need to pay an engineer. But once you get your construction permit, you'll need to have funds for your studio and equipment. The Prometheus Radio Project has a very detailed [document](https://tinyurl.com/lbjlo4c) (tinyurl.com/lbjlo4c) on studio and transmitter equipment that features lists of suggested equipment and approximate prices. Keep in mind that studio equipment can range in price from a few thousand dollars to hundreds of thousands — this all depends on the size and quality of equipment. Transmission equipment could cost as little as \$4,000 or upwards of \$12,000. Use the following guidelines to make wise spending choices.

- **Buying used equipment can be great, but it can also be risky.** Certain components of your radio station (computers, CD players, turntables, etc.) will work very well even if they're used. However, you should be cautious about purchasing any used equipment, even if it comes from a reputable vendor. Ultimately, it may be safer to buy new equipment and ensure its quality (and warranty).  
**Acquire as much equipment from local sources as possible** to avoid high shipping costs. This especially goes for cumbersome towers and masts (they tend to be both heavy and, \*ahem\* ... *toweringly* tall).
- **Contact local radio stations, TV stations and recording studios** if you want to obtain pre-owned equipment. This way, you may be able to better ensure the quality of the equipment since professionals used it. These organizations often have old equipment hanging around that is unused, so you may be able to obtain it very cheaply (or even for free).
- **Build your own furniture.** Building your own furniture (countertops, tables, etc.) will allow you to customize the setup of your studio. This is crucial to the comfort of DJs and guests who might be spending long hours in the studio (for that reason, you should not skimp on chairs). Building your own furniture can potentially save you money, too.

- **Share your frequency with another organization** to save on antenna and transmission costs. If there are multiple licensees for the same frequency, you can split the cost of the antenna and other transmission equipment. You may even want to consider sharing studio space.

## 2. Recurring expenses

Even a “bare-bones” station will require a number of ongoing expenses to keep it running.

- **Rent and utilities.** You’ll probably need to rent space for both your studio and your transmitter site. You may be able to acquire a small room in a community center or other building to use as your studio. If you would like to have multiple studios, you’ll likely need multiple rooms. If you’re able to place the transmitter on the roof of the building that houses your studio, you won’t need to rent a separate space for the transmitter. You may also be able to negotiate a reduced or waived fee to place your transmitter on a tall building. Each of these sites (studio and transmitter) will require electricity. The studio will also require phones and Internet access.
- **Content licensing.** If you plan to play music on your station, you will need to pay licensing fees to performance rights organizations like ASCAP, BMI and SESAC, which pay artists royalties for music played in public across the country. To stream music online, you will need to pay Sound Exchange.
- **Staff.** Although you may not initially have the funds to pay staff, it’s a big help to have at least one paid staff person to manage the station and its volunteers.
- **Equipment upkeep/emergencies.** Equipment will fail. It’s unavoidable. You should have emergency funding available to ensure that your station can stay on the air (or get back on quickly) even in the event of a major catastrophe.

# VI. Construction of Your Radio Station

You’re the proud holder of a construction permit for an LPFM radio station. Now it’s time to start building! From the time you’re granted a construction permit you’ll have just 18 months to build the station (with a possible extension to a total of three years). Hopefully you already found a space for your studio near your transmitter site, but if you haven’t, now is the time to begin looking. As noted above, your studio can be as small as one room or as large as an entire floor in a building. Whatever you decide and however much your station can handle financially, you’ll have to start building soon. Consult microradio pioneer Steven Dunifer’s website [FreeRadio.org](http://FreeRadio.org) for suggestions.

## 1. Select the right space.

Although it might be nice to have a lot of space, you don’t actually need much for a radio station. Here are some of the most important factors to consider when selecting a space to house your radio station.

- **Smaller means less to maintain.** This goes for rent and utilities as well as just keeping the space tidy and inhabitable. Things can get messy if you’ve got multiple sprawling studios and an office space with no dedicated staff to maintain it. It’s best to have the smallest space possible without being too cramped. You’ll save on heating, cooling and electricity expenses.
- **Team up with a local organization that has some space available.** Since a radio studio can pretty easily fit into a small office, there may be a local organization (nonprofit, church, community media center, town hall) that has an open office and would be willing to let you set up there. It can be a symbiotic relationship: They’ll provide you with space and you’ll provide them with a stronger tie to the community and on-air statements of gratitude for the use of their space.
- **Small *doesn’t* mean cramped.** Comfort is essential — you and your fellow producers will likely be spending a *lot* of time in the studio. Find a space that allows you to design a comfortable and ergonomically sound studio.

- **Allow for flexibility.** Hopefully your station will be around for a long time — your equipment, however, won't. Make sure that repairs and maintenance can be performed easily in the space you choose for your studio. Walls or ceilings that are inaccessible will be annoying to deal with if you need to adjust your transmission equipment or upgrade the wiring on your studio equipment.
- **Enlist the help of others.** Draw on the wisdom of your organization to pick and design the space. Members of your organization will be collaborating in other ways once the station is built, so use this planning activity to grow that community within your volunteer staff.

## 2. Design your studio.

You may have some ideas about how you want to organize and lay out your studio(s), but the space(s) in which you're going to build will dictate much of the design. Now that you've selected the location for your studio, you'll need to come up with a design for the interior that suits the needs of your membership.

- **Design with durability in mind.** Your LPFM will hopefully get a lot of use and be around for many years. Build and/or buy durable furniture that can handle a lot of traffic.
- **Think about the comfort of *everyone* who will be using the studios.** For short interview sessions, it may be fine for the board operator to twist around in a seat to look at the guests, but for an hour-long interview program it will be difficult to maintain an awkward position. Similarly, guests should be comfortable in the studio. People generally don't like to sit with their backs to a door.
- **Work with what you've got.** Even if your room is dumpy and small, you can build a high-quality studio that fits the space nicely.
- **Get creative.** This is where custom furniture building can come in handy. Try to incorporate a utilitarian design as often as possible, but don't overlook aesthetics. Otherwise, people won't want to hang out in the studio!

## 3. Team up with an engineer.

If you consulted with an engineer to perform a frequency survey, it might be time for you to get together again — an engineer is essential in the building and design process. You'll avoid many potential problems by soliciting (semi-) professional help.

- **Engineers have experience.** Most experienced radio engineers have built radio stations before. Use that expertise to ensure your station is of the highest quality. Engineers will help you design your studio and troubleshoot any issues that arise.
- **Engineers are creative.** Engineers will find ways to make your station work. If you really want your special purple curvy countertop to have a built-in console, an engineer can help you with this.
- **Engineers can save you money.** Building a functioning radio station requires a considerable number of parts — everything from cables and consoles to antennae and transmitters. An engineer can build many of these items from inexpensive parts purchased at hardware stores or electronics wholesalers. Since the engineer will most likely have experience purchasing equipment, he or she **may also know inexpensive vendors** to buy from or **may even have some old equipment to donate to your station.**

## 4. Ask for help.

Don't be afraid to ask for help — this is complicated stuff! A number of organizations and individuals can help you with all sorts of questions.

- [The Prometheus Radio Project](http://prometheusradio.org) (prometheusradio.org) can help you with a range of technical and operational issues and also offers legal advice and general support. Webinars and videos that Prometheans have hosted are [archived on the website](http://prometheusradio.org/archives) (prometheusradio.org/archives).
- [Common Frequency](http://commonfrequency.org) (commonfrequency.org) provides both free and low-cost aid and has supported the launch of grassroots radio stations since 2006.
- [The National Federation of Community Broadcasters](http://nfc.org) (nfc.org) hosts a yearly conference featuring panels and workshops for community radio stations.
- [Free Radio Berkeley](http://freeradio.org) (freeradio.org) is a project of Stephen Dunifer's that offers equipment for sale and some useful technical information.

# VI. Developing Programming

Long before you get on the air, you can begin planning the programming that will be your station's voice in the community. Below are some suggestions and best practices for creating vibrant and engaging broadcast content.

## 1. Be consistent.

One of the main goals of any radio station is to have as many people tuned in as regularly as possible. That means providing a consistent broadcast schedule that engages listeners.

- **Organize your programming.** Your program day should be arranged logically and consist of music, news, talk, and entertainment programming that appeals to a large swath of people. Consider establishing "block programming," which places similar programs together throughout the week so that it's easy for listeners to know what might be featured at a particular time of day. For example, if you plan to include Spanish-language programming, consider grouping it together on the same day of the week so that Spanish-language listeners know when to tune in.
- **Craft a programming philosophy.** This philosophy can be as simple or as detailed as your organization would like and can also evolve as you develop your programming. The programming philosophy can be a more detailed version of your station's mission. For instance, if your mission contains language about providing an alternative to mainstream media, that should be reflected in your programming choices. Address how programming choices are made, and how programs may be cancelled if they no longer meet community needs.
- **Establish expectations for program quality.** A high-quality community radio station shouldn't sound the same as a commercial station or NPR. For example, commercial and even public stations sometimes exclude speakers with regional dialects or foreign accents, while community stations showcase a diversity of voices. But even a grassroots station needs to sound clear and distinct. Basic standards for audio production and on-air quality will **keep people tuning in.**

## 2. Encourage creativity.

The beauty of community radio is that it tends to attract a diverse group of people with wide-ranging interests. Take advantage of that diversity and create programming that's unique and absorbing. Be quirky, experimental, strange ... or feature an innovative twist on a mainstream format.

- **Create a programming philosophy that values creativity.** The more you enable creative programming, the more that people will want to produce it. Provide an institutional backbone that supports adventurous programming.
- **Think in broad terms about radio.** Your community has a powerful new tool, and there are a million ways to use it. Consider experimental spoken-word broadcasts like radio dramas or storytelling hours. What about an on-air swap meet, or a health call-in show hosted by a local doctor? A farm report for local farmers? How about a youth poetry show? Community radio stations have given birth to some great genre-bending programs.

## 3. Provide support.

To ensure the quality of your radio station's broadcasts, you need to support your volunteer program producers. Help them sound professional and connect with listeners.

- **Develop program ideas in tandem with producers.** Help new producers come up with programs that will be engaging and unique. If your organization is committee-driven, have the programming committee guide new producers in developing and planning their programs.
- **Provide feedback to producers.** Periodically review and critique programs; then give feedback to producers.
- **Encourage self-review.** Encourage producers to record their programs and listen to them later. This will enable producers to recognize flaws that may have gone unnoticed during the actual broadcast. Listening to their programs also reminds producers of what elements or formats they might overuse. Self-review also helps producers pinpoint and build on program strengths.

## 4. Involve your community.

You can't have true community radio without community involvement. Engaging your neighbors will help you create programming that reflects your community's needs and interests.

- **Give frequent tours.** By inviting people from the community into your space, they'll see how much fun producing radio programs can be and will want to get involved.
- **Have a presence in town.** Simply showing that your station exists will attract people to it. Set up tables at community events. Have DJs from your station play music at block parties. Post flyers for events your station is hosting.
- **Go to other community group meetings.** Promote your station at meetings of any arts and cultural groups. Volunteer organizations tend to attract people who simply like to volunteer — use this to your advantage.
- **Create and distribute literature about your station.** This can happen both on- and offline. Whatever your approach, make sure to distribute promotional material as widely as possible.

## 5. Spark conversations via local public affairs programming.

Local public affairs programming is almost nonexistent in other media these days, making it one of the most valuable offerings in community radio. A live program on current events with guests and listener calls is relatively simple and quick to produce, and will add a great deal of value to your community.

- **Find out what issues matter to your community.** Community radio features programs on the environment, the LGBTQ community, the arts, issues affecting those with disabilities ... the sky's the limit! What do people in your neighborhood care about? Base your programming decisions on community needs.
- **Create a local news program.** News programs take considerably more time to produce than other public affairs programs, but you can start off small — by reading and discussing news headlines from other sources, for example. Train volunteers to produce news segments, and start with a weekly program and build up to a daily show.

## 6. Offer music programming.

You'll likely have many volunteers to host music shows. Here are some tips to get you started.

- **Before collecting music, decide what kind of music your station will play.** This will help focus your choices when you're building a music library.
- **Build your library.** Your programmers can bring in their own collections, but over time your station can develop its own library. Organize a music drive to accept donations from listeners. Contact your local library for discarded records that are in good condition. Get on lists to receive free promotional CDs from labels (one place to start is the *College Music Journal*, or *CMJ*). And ensure you have room in your budget to buy songs from iTunes or other online services.
- **Train your programmers in on-air rules.** Learn the FCC's indecency and obscenity rules, and ensure your programmers know they are responsible for playing only songs that follow the rules. Violations can mean big fines! Identify and label songs that cannot be aired or must be "bleeped," but also remind programmers that they are responsible for checking the music they play. You may also want to create your own guidelines, in line with your station's mission, on what's acceptable to air. (Some stations won't allow programmers to play the same song more than once a month, for example, to keep the sound fresh.)
- **Focus on local music and musicians.** This is where a community radio station can really shine. Bring in local artists for interviews and live performances, host music events and festivals, and cover the local music scene. Is there a folk music indigenous to your region, or an innovative hip-hop or electronic music scene? Think about showcasing the kind of music that mainstream stations ignore.