

Intricately produced promotion marries suspense, social commentary and plenty of market attention

Two Strangers And A Wedding

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by any standards, the courtship of T.R. Bell and Laura O'Connor would be deemed unorthodox. Their meeting was orchestrated by hot AC WTMX (101.9 the Mix)/Chicago marketing director Dave Karwowski and his team as an extended "social experiment." ■ The bizarre promotion—which included background checks, interviews with parents and exes, and a first date that took place behind an oh-so-unromantic tarp at a local restaurant—culminated in a wedding attended by family and friends, and a performance by R&B singer John Legend.

Checks And Balances

When Bell and O'Connor finally came face to face at Chicago's River East Arts Center, it was not love at first sight. And while in the end they never exchanged vows, *Two Strangers and a Wedding: Is Love Blind?* was an unqualified success for Mix. The stunt created a media frenzy in Chicago and piqued the interest of the producers of ABC-TV's "20/20," who documented the whirlwind courtship in a 15-minute segment.

Mix listeners responded by mobbing the morning show at Kaminsky Park and flooding the station's Web site, eager for footage of the event. "We normally get 1.8 [million]-2 million hits on our Web site per month," Karwowski says. "We got 4 million hits in two days. People were just devouring our site."

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Dowse—or A&D—a joint venture between Phil Dowse Media and Absolute Radio International that was formed by primary directors Phil Dowse and Clive Dickens in 2006. According to Dowse, he and Dickens felt that "no one was working hard to

and emotionally engaging content is reasonably rare on U.S. radio."

A&D launched *Two Strangers and a Wedding* on an Australian morning show in the late 1990s. Since, the promotion has been successfully carried out by stations in New Zealand, Ireland, the United Kingdom, Hungary and in the States, at KLOS/Los Angeles, WPLJ/New York and WTMX.

"There was no such thing as reality television or reality radio in the '90s," Dowse says. "The whole concept of *Two Strangers and a Wedding* was unheard-of at the time.

"What we're trying to do here is find people who are really serious about falling in love. Once the radio stations get to that point, they know how to run *Two Strangers and a Wedding*," he adds.

Although Dowse and Dickens strive to guide each station through the process, Dowse cautions that "we can't control what happens on the final day, and indeed, what happens afterward."

In one market, a couple got married "at 9 on a Friday morning and at noon on a Saturday were off to Bali with the television crew along for the ride. By 10 at night the bride was in bed with the television cameraman. It didn't last too long."

To prepare stations for the promotion, Dowse and Dickens go into their markets and stage a two-day boot camp to walk the entire station through every element—from the morning show to the product team to the programming staff.

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The Best Of Strangers

Theresa Angela, a 30-year veteran of hot AC WPLJ/New York and the station's promotion and marketing director, staged *Two Strangers and a Wedding* in 2006. "People couldn't believe we were actually going to do something like this," she says. "We explained that we'll find a bride and then we'll help her find the groom and neither one will be able to see each other or meet each other, but they'll be able to talk with each other. And hopefully, at the altar, they'll decide they want to go through with it and make a go of it."

Ultimately, once again, Lisa Frissora (aka Roxanne) and John Malloy (aka Tommy) didn't officially tie the knot at the wedding hosted by WPLJ morning personalities Scott Shannon and Todd Pettengill, but they dated for several months.

Angela says that she handled most of the logistics, but "everyone had to work on this from programming, sales and promotion, so it was a team effort."

The Mix's Karwowski says that the project required seven staffers. To handle every aspect of the promotion, the work was divided into thirds. Karwowski says that part of the group sifted through applications and qualified people, another third handled on-air content and guest management and the remaining third focused on the wedding itself.

Because *Two Strangers and a Wedding* attracts so much media interest when executed correctly, it is an excellent tool for generating revenue. "I feel with the right sponsorship and right clients onboard, these kinds of reality games can be unbelievably profitable," Dowse says.

Angela adds that doing a promotion of this magnitude requires the support of the sales department and their clients. "Everything was coordinated through our sales and promotion departments: from the wedding gowns to the tuxedos to the wedding bands to the catering. Everything was done from scratch."

The Mix's goal was to secure one main sponsor, which in this case was U.S. Cellular. Karwowski says he was careful to introduce other sponsors like jewelers and florists naturally throughout the promotion, however. "For the audience, we didn't want to come off as this prepackaged, well-thought-out concept—which it was. To the consumer it came off as an idea that grew into a production."

After Karwowski and his team completed *Two Strangers and a Wedding*, he says, "it opened our eyes to what we can accomplish. Until you're pushed outside your safety zone, you don't know what you can or can't do. It showed us interesting things about our radio station and listeners."

Dowse, who plans to launch a new project in the States in which a station gets to "play God" and grant a listener another chance at life, including a new name, job and friends, says that the appeal of A&D's promotions is in creating comment and controversy.

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Once the boot camp ends, Dowse and Dickens conduct "conference calls two or three times a week with the station right up to the beginning of the project, through the seven- or eight-week campaign and right to the end."

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"That equals content, which is one of the things that radio stations need to do in this day and age," he says. "If you just play the best songs for your target, you're incredibly vulnerable." R&R

