

Accessories Make the Man (or Woman!)

There is no question that simplicity is sometimes the best of all worlds—just a radio, a dog, and a lot of open space for both, and I can be a happy camper. However, there is also something to be said about having multiple radios, antennas, and various accessories at your disposal to enhance your listening opportunities.

I have a dual-band handheld radio which covers AM to 1.2 GHz, so technically it can hear a whole lot of signals. Even with its broad range of reception, I would not want to depend on it for all of my radio listening. Neither would I want to depend on a bare-bones radio station without some of the many options to broaden my radio enjoyment.

Antennas are not exactly accessories(!), but having multiple antenna options puts them in line with the spirit of this topic, so I will include them here. If you have only have one or two antenna options for your radio station, you really are missing out on a lot of possibilities. Like the radio which cannot do everything well, no antenna can do it all. Sometimes less is more, and sometimes more is more—a lot depends on what you are trying to do.

I have two horizontally polarized antennas for various HF bands, and one vertical for HF, and each antenna has its use. I also have two outdoor VHF/UHF antennas and one in the attic for poor weather conditions. When not in use for severe weather communications, the attic antenna is often devoted to APRS digipeating (more on this in a moment).

Since I am a shortwave fan in addition to amateur radio, I have a random wire antenna which I can attach to various shortwave radios, and indeed have been toying around with the idea of setting up a table to devote purely to shortwave radio and radios, swapping out radios once a month or so to experiment with old and new technologies. Is this going overboard? Perhaps. But then again, perhaps not. I don't want any of my radios to just sit around gathering dust—radios are meant to be used!

Switching Antennas

Unless you are into manually swapping antenna cables all the time, you will want to get some coax switches to change antenna inputs. There are all kinds of switches on the market, but I find I prefer the ones which have the ability to be switched to ground when not in use, as well as having some basic static lightning protection. I realize almost nothing I can do/afford will

protect my equipment against a direct lightning strike, but basic protection against nearby strikes and static charges is money well spent in my book.

Switches are preferred to splitters in most cases, as splitters usually reduce signal strength where you do not want it. For sharing one antenna with multiple transmitting radios, you must use switches to avoid damaging the radios. If you must use a splitter between two or more receiving radios, make sure the inherent losses in the system are minimal. Or look into adding a pre-amplifier to compensate for the losses.

SWR/Power Meters

An accessory which is quite useful is an external SWR/power meter, or some combination of the two. I regularly use an external tuner with my main HF rig, and it has an SWR meter and power meter built in. While most modern radios have a built in SWR meter, I like having an external one for accuracy and ease of use.

A tuner for VHF might not be on your immediate radar, but I was able to pick one up a few years ago and have found it useful, especially when working SSB with an amplifier. What might be only a slight VSWR issue at 50 watts can turn into a major one at 150 watts. Modern HF receivers that also cover 2 meters might easily back down power levels if the SWR is more than 1.3:1, at least this has been my experience.

I also like having SWR meters inline for VHF/UHF bands to keep an eye on things or to see how changing ends of the bands affects my VSWR on the 440 band. Losses add up quickly here, so it pays to know what's going on.

Antenna Analyzer

An antenna analyzer is an indispensable tool once you have one—you really will wonder how you ever got along without it. I shared the cost with a friend and we just trade back and forth as needed, which cut both our costs considerably. However, now having had one, I see it as being nearly as important as my radio.

An antenna analyzer can tell you a lot about your antenna system, including VSWR, capacitance/impedance changes, the location of a break in your coax, coax length, and much more. It even acts as a signal generator throughout its workable range, as well as on various harmonics.

While an antenna analyzer is useful in the shack, it is even more useful out near your antenna for checking antenna resonance before factoring in a long run of coax.

Another advantage to an analyzer is the repeatability of results so that tracking changes in a setup or over time is easily done. Some units have memory storage and can be hooked up to a computer, while others only give the immediate results—but these can still be logged for later reference.

Monitors and Hubs

I find having two computer monitors for my radio station has a number of benefits. When using logging software I am able to use one side for the logging form, while the other monitor shows me spotting information, previous log book entries, or radio control screens for various functions. Another use when logging is to be able to look at someone's QRZ page or go to their special event station page.

There are many radio-related pieces of software for digital mode use, image transfers, and satellite tracking/communication. You may have streaming sources, reference sources, or any of a hundred other things you would like to be able to see while having something else open. I have used multiple monitors for years and highly recommend it.

Another convenience feature is leaving one or two free USB cables attached to the computer to quickly connect accessories as needed, such as USB chargers, cameras, recorders, and the like. If USB connections are at a premium, there are inexpensive USB hubs available to increase connectivity—just be sure you get what you actually need! Some hubs do not have their own power source and thus divide power from the computer port among everything connected. I prefer units which offer full power to each port.

Next month I will cover some more accessories which I hope you will find useful, but of course each of us will eventually find things specific to our own needs. With Dayton Hamvention coming up this May it is a great time to look for odds and ends which will make operating more fun!

Until next time! 73, Robert AK3Q