

The Elmers Corner: A Little Planning Goes a Long Way (Part 2)

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In this edition of The Elmers Corner I want to continue talking about how to prepare for and listen to the radio, regardless of the mode. I mentioned last time how I believe listening to the radio should be an event—not an occurrence. Successful listening takes planning, preparation, and intent. So how does one go about turning an evening with the radio into an event? This time around we will look at *preparation* and *intent*.

Preparation

Preparation is closely tied into planning of course, but it does involve getting equipment together, choosing listening conditions, and assembling whatever additional items might be needed to fit the listening needs of the evening. (I am using “evening” as a generic term for any listening time available—one of my favorite times to listen is in the morning before the day gets going and I can enjoy the relative silence, my coffee, and the radio!)

As noted above, different listening opportunities will require more or less associated equipment, but of course the most basic item is the radio. If using a portable radio, the location will greatly influence reception, but this will have been taken into consideration during the planning stage. Similarly, the choice of antenna will be influenced by what one intends to receive, as well as what type of listening will be employed. There are times when I want the freedom of a portable with a built-in antenna, and so this may limit some of my other choices in terms of listening opportunities.

When I am using a tabletop radio with outdoor antennas, I am usually doing more serious listening, and this may require additional hardware such as recording devices, antenna tuners, computer hook-ups or similar preparation. I do have a dedicated shack for much of my radio work which allows me to have a good deal of my equipment ready to go, but I still find there can be a bit of preparation involved if I am doing something out of the ordinary, or when I am combining several activities. I even have two computers in my shack so that when needed I can keep one focused on the radio side of things while the other allows for easy logging, Internet connectivity, and similar uses.

As an example, I often want to verify a shortwave or AM broadcast station with an Internet stream or with a search for the station based on the frequency and suspected location. If I am using my one computer for radio control or SDR applications, having a second computer handy keeps me from having to switch software back and forth, as well as allowing for recording or

demodulating of signals. It is a great use for an older, less capable computer.

I personally find it hard to listen attentively if the area where I am working is piled up with junk (I am by no means neat or exceptionally efficient—no one would ever accuse me of being left-brained!). A bit of preparation can at least put needed items in arm's reach, and this can make the whole listening experience much better.

I usually keep at least a scratch pad nearby to jot information down, even if I am using my computer for logging. I find it useful for making notes, jotting down frequencies or details about a station that I might want to know in the future, or any such scribbles.

If I expect to record transmissions I get my Sangean digital audio recorder out and clear an area away in front of the appropriate speaker or radio to get the clearest recording possible. I also keep headphones nearby as needed for pulling out weak or inter-modulated signals and to help with clarity. I find headphones often allow me to reduce RF gain while still allowing me to hear the intended signal, which can often reduce the effects of static and other noise issues.

Preparation also makes for memorable evenings at the radio when one is able to discover new things. There are many sources of radio information, from blogs to clubs to websites, and a lot of useful information can flow in on an almost daily basis. A spreadsheet or database program can be most useful, or even just good old-fashioned pen and paper.

I receive a daily digest from several Yahoo groups with logs shared by HF utility and military enthusiasts. We do not always have to build a better mousetrap, or even build one at all, as there are many folks involved in the hobby who happily share their information. I will confess to being quite pleased when I can add something to the collective, however, especially when some of the seasoned veterans say something like "good catch!" That just makes my day!

I would recommend making several spreadsheets based on general groupings such as shortwave, utility, aeronautical, etc. as a means of keeping the lists manageable. If they are all maintained in one list, over time that list will become confusing, or at the very least, unwieldy.

Once the type of listening is decided upon and the equipment, these lists can give direction for exploration. Conversely, the lists can be the determining factor for an evening's radio pursuits; either way, the preparation in

maintaining these lists will pay handsome dividends when we can actually sit down at the radio.

Intent

Listening becomes an event when planning and preparation combine with *intent*. Intent, or in the more modern vernacular, *intentionality*, means there is a purpose, a goal to be achieved, for which planning and preparation are a means to an end. We are, in some respects, like an archaeologist on a dig—we go where there are likely to be artifacts found, but we also know we might have to sift through a lot of dirt in the process. Not every evening at the radio is going to be a success, but when we listen and operate with intent, the odds are much more in our favor.

Having a clear picture of what we want to achieve makes it far more likely to happen. When the goals are simple they may come rather easily, provided the planning and preparation were sufficient. A night listening to my favorite programs on various shortwave broadcasts may be as simple as choosing the right radio, the right antenna, and possessing a current schedule of operation for the stations I want to hear.

On the other hand, if my intention for the evening is to bag some elusive DX stations on the amateur bands, my planning and preparation will be more involved, and I will guard against distractions. I will also allow for the unexpected surprise or serendipitous event which could take me down an entirely different path. I also suggest having a backup plan in case the original goals cannot be met. There will always be unexpected interference, poor band conditions, or any number of other things which can get in the way of hearing the intended target.

The best planning in the world cannot anticipate a solar flare or a storm which causes static crashes right on the bands I wanted to explore. Having another option or two at the ready means I can still go with the flow when circumstances require flexibility, and with all my radio interests, there are always signals worth chasing!

By managing my expectations, I can avoid the frustration of twirling the dial only to say “there’s nothing on the radio tonight!” There is ***always*** something on the radio—we just have to look in the right places. When the amateur bands are slow, I know there are always utility stations I can chase, broadcast AM/FM DX stations, or shortwave broadcasts which can power through almost any propagation conditions. Happy hunting!!