

QUESTIONS Answered

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What's one Slacker feature you are surprised that more listeners don't utilize? Listeners don't use "heart" and "ban" as much as you might expect. When I look at song-level popularity metrics, I see that if someone enjoys a song, they are most likely to let it play through. And if they don't like the song, they are most likely to skip it. It takes a really powerful response to a song to lead a listener to hit the "heart" button, effectively raising their hand and say, "Yes, I love this song, and I want more

of it." Or conversely, to hit the "ban" button and say, "I hate this so much that I am going to [banish] it from my listening experience forever." So in that sense, finish and skip metrics are my best overall indicator of popularity, and ban and heart metrics tell me when a song is really exceptional or abrasive.

Pure-play online music platform Slacker recently redesigned its platform, and so far the results have been stunning. In a recent interview with USA Today's Talking Tech, Slacker CEO Jim Cady says the platform has added 6 million new listeners since the launch and that the amount of time people are listening is up by 25%. To learn more about the thought process behind the face-lift, Billboard talked with senior radio program manager Mat Bates.

What did the recent redesign entail? We addressed three key areas of the listener experience. One, really showcasing all the features that make us the most complete music service. Curated radio, on-demand listening, news, talk, sports; all of which help ensure our listeners don't have to jump from service to service to get what they want. Two, we made it much more visual and easier to navigate, so it's simpler for new listeners to get started and find a home while power users have really powerful customization options. Three, we completely reimagined the design and experience across all platforms, anticipating where listener demand is heading. Not just mobile and Web, but tablets and other connected at-home devices too.

What was the impetus for the changes? While we already have an extremely loyal and active base of core listeners, we have now broadened our appeal and are targeting mainstream music fans. This person may be listening to radio via their mobile device for the first time, may only see three concerts a year and may not spend their free time scouring hipster music blogs, but they love music and they are busy. With our new approach, we are providing the most complete and easiest-to-use home for music fans across the spectrum.

What makes Slacker stand out from other services? We add to the radio experience with on-demand listening, human curation and actual hosts. An example is our recently launched 101 Greatest Classic Rock Songs station. We worked with the legendary Redbeard of InTheStudio.net, and he not only hosts the countdown, but provided one-of-a-kind content with the biggest rock artists in the world from his archives of interviews. A curated countdown, hosted by a legendary DJ and featuring commentary from folks like Paul McCartney and David Bowie—that's well beyond anything that an algorithm can do. And it resonates in a very human way: TSL on that station is over 70 minutes.

What trends are you seeing when it comes to listeners' tastes in music? A hit is a hit with the CHR audience. Its texture doesn't matter. It's the biggest format, and its fans don't discriminate against hits no matter what genre they come from. EDM is a big deal, but the breathless press coverage is disproportionate to its actual reach. Hip-hop listeners churn through new music much faster and have a much larger appetite for it than any other genre. Country is hotter than it's been since the '90s, and the new country audience doesn't have much use for gold/catalog songs. The alternative audience has completely evolved: The active rock and grunge textures are totally repellent to the audience that self-identifies as "alternative" now. As active rock stations retreat into their catalogs, those fans are increasingly looking for a home and a place to hear great new music. Our hard rock stations are growing at the same pace as our smooth jazz stations did when that format was killed off at terrestrial radio. Oh, and smooth jazz fans listen all . . . day . . . long. —Mike Stern

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