

How 'Free Beer and Hot Wings' Built Community by Not Following the Rulebook

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It makes sense when you think about it. When you name a radio show [Free Beer and Hot Wings](#), there probably isn't going to be much about the operation that could be described as typical.

I spoke with Greg "Free Beer" Daniels and the show's executive producer, Steve McKiernan. Our lively conversation navigated us to discuss the typical elements of the show that are atypical. Starting with the show name itself, because where better to start than there.

The name arrived when Daniels was paired with Chris Michaels to do a show at their college station, KIWR in Omaha. Michaels had played in a cover band called *Free Beer and Hot Wings* to get college kids to pay the cover charge at a local bar.

"It worked. The owner of the bar had been angry because he didn't figure it out in time. All the people that paid seven dollars to get in were pissed," says Daniels.

Based on that tenuous success, and the fact they couldn't think of anything better. The two decided to use the name for six weeks just to get attention. A few weeks in, they hosted an event at a bookstore with people not on the lookout for the band. Instead, the crowd were looking for *Free Beer and Hot Wings*.

"We were shocked anyone was coming to see us at all. Afterward we compared notes and thought, 'Holy s**t. People know us by these fake names. We may have to keep them,'" said Daniels.

Nearly three decades later the names are still in place. *Free Beer and Hot Wings* finds itself syndicated into seventy markets by [Compass Media](#). True to form, the syndication effort didn't begin like most shows. In fact, the early beginnings were based in New Jersey with a show on just two signals.

"The stations were both kind of regional, so we couldn't really do a lot of local content," said Daniels. "People on the Jersey Shore didn't necessarily care about what's happening in Trenton. We were kind of doing a show at ten thousand feet."

While doing that type of content played a role in preparing them for syndication, the opportunity to move to Grand Rapids would have launched the show into multiple markets.

Meanwhile, Nassau Broadcasting won a critical court case holding the *Free Beer and Hot Wings* team to a non-compete. That essentially blocked their move to Grand Rapids. However, in due time the company eventually relented and allowed them to make the move.

“We lost the case our lawyer assured us was a slam dunk,” said Daniels. “Then they agreed that we could leave if we syndicated the show back to their stations for the remainder of the year while they looked for a replacement.”

After a couple of months, Nassau Broadcasting asked to formalize a syndication deal because the show was still performing well in New Jersey. Soon after, Nassau expanded the show to its stations in New Hampshire and Portland, Maine. Hence, syndication officially began for *Free Beer and Hot Wings*.

The program then moved to Grand Rapids, where it still originates from to this day. For some, that’s not a large market to house one of the more dominant syndicated programs in the country. That story starts at a Morning Show Boot Camp event when the *Free Beer and Hot Wings* show was still in its infancy.

At the event, the program sat in on a panel that included Jeff Detrow from the *Jeff and Jer Showgram* in San Diego. The topic, the concept of marrying a market.

“That just really spoke to us,” says Daniels. “We saw other shows chase after big markets, and get their opportunity. Then hit a bad situation and get kicked to the curb. That wasn’t what we wanted.”

With roots in the Midwest and the idea of finding a permanent home for the show on their minds, the Grand Rapids opportunity was perfect. Even though they were already syndicating their program, the *Free Beer and Hot Wings* team set out to own the market.



The process began with building their show clocks. Every hour included three to six minutes of local time for local content. The goal was to have a local voice discussing local issues and stories on 97.9 WGRD. The next step was becoming involved in the local community.

“All of our families were here. We were desperate to make Grand Rapids work, and I think that probably helped,” says Daniels. “We brought lunch to people who wrote in to the show three or four days a week for five years. It’s a little thing, but it worked in a midsized market.”

Another trick for winning over Grand Rapids was finding opportunities to get in front of lots of people. Seeking out opportunities with local sports franchises and other opportunities to introduce themselves to where the local community comes together.

“We’d say yes to anything,” admitted Daniels. “Being called *Free Beer and Hot Wings* doesn’t exactly make people want you to host their charity events. But when we were asked, we always said yes.”

As the show grew, they also started calling their most dedicated listeners “idiots.” A tactic that, like many other things about the program, might seem counterintuitive.



“Idiot is actually a term of endearment on our show,” says McKiernan. “They’re the people that are our most dedicated P1 listeners. The ones that comment on everything, and go to every show. They’re first in line for whatever we’re doing. So, we affectionately refer to them as idiots.”

The most dedicated ones of all in fact pay a monthly fee to be members of the show’s website. Gaining unique access to additional show content. Those consumers are called ‘Fancy Idiots.’

Many shows likely would welcome the extra income from listeners paying monthly subscription fees. *Free Beer and Hot Wings* instead took a different approach. They use some of the money that comes in each month to fund a charitable endeavor called “Idiots for Underdogs,” a 501(c)(3) charity.

The idea grew out of their annual Christmas Break-In program. Luckily a promotion they borrowed, with permission from *Jeff and Jer* in San Diego. Each holiday season the show solicits nominations for needy families who can’t buy holiday gifts. The team, along with other hosts from the station, “break in” to the nominees’ homes — with help from the person who nominated the family — and leave behind gifts and other holiday cheer.

According to McKiernan, that evolved into “Idiots for Underdogs” when Daniels said he wanted to use that feeling of giving and spread it out all year long.

“If we had an opportunity to help somebody. Whether it’s getting a wheelchair or paying expenses for a veteran. We wanted to be able to do it. Taking part of the money from the ‘Fancy Idiots’ means there’s always money coming in. When we need it we can disperse it,” says McKiernan.

Daniels adds that the beauty of the setup is that the listeners feel like they are part of each charitable act all year round.

“When we do a donation, we say, ‘Idiots, this is what you’re doing.’ That’s how the audience has ownership,” adds Daniels.

At this point many of those gestures impact listeners in markets other than Grand Rapids. That’s just one of the many benefits they try to offer affiliates to help grow the show. Beyond the usual daily promos and a willingness to cut liners, Daniels says they help the sales team by not charging endorsement fees for local sponsors.

“It’s a little thing,” said Daniels. “When new stations hear that — particularly the sales staff and management — all of a sudden they’re really interested.”

The program aims to make ten to twelve affiliate market visits a year. Most of those include a live morning show in front of a local audience. The opportunity provides instant feedback from both the live audience, and the staffs inside the walls of the individual markets themselves.

Some stations have turned those shows into ticketed events. Many air in the morning during the normal show time. Other events — called *Live at Night* — take place in the evening, off the air and free of F.C.C. guidelines.

In Grand Rapids, *Live at Night* shows have sold out venues as large as 2,300 people. But for *Free Beer and Hot Wings*, it's not always about the size of the venue.

“We’ve done *Live at Night* shows in a union hall in Illinois that sold out at 150 people, which is great,” said Daniels. “It’s a chance to hang out with P1s and really laugh with them. Plus help the local station make money.”

Live at Night allows the program to talk about things that can’t be said over the airwaves. However, being free of the F.C.C. for a night isn’t as big of a factor as it might be for other rock-based shows.

“We’re not your typical, TNA rock show,” Daniels says. “Even when we were younger and more aggressive or filthy or whatever. We still took more inspiration from the likes of *The Bert Show* and *Ace and TJ* than we ever did from any of the, ‘let’s put a staple in your balls, black t-shirt rock shows.’ We’ve always been more touchy-feely. Now that we’re older, we’ve gone even more in that direction.”

Instead, *Free Beer and Hot Wings* focuses more on sharing life’s most embarrassing moments. In fact, it’s a requirement for the team, known as “Show Code.” It began in New Jersey when there were three people on the show. Daniels admits part of the impetus for the discussion was that he took himself a little too seriously. Adding he was afraid of being embarrassed.

“We had a talk one day and came up with show code,” Daniels explains. “If all three of us share when we have something stupid happen, that’s three times the stories. Those are the stories that always resonate.”

The idea was only meant to apply to the three of them, but then they talked about it on the air and listeners embraced the concept.

“Over time, the audience started calling in and saying, ‘hey, I’ve got a show code story,’” said Daniels. “Suddenly you’re all sharing these humbling moments, and it puts everybody on the same level.”

In many ways, that philosophy explains why *Free Beer and Hot Wings* has lasted as long as it has. The show built its brand on the very things most radio consultants might warn against — fake names, calling fans “idiots,” and openly sharing their most embarrassing moments.

Yet those quirks became the connective tissue that turned listeners into a community.

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