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All holiday, all the time

By Myles Ethan Lascity

No, it's not an overactive imagination.

Holiday cheer has been coming from radio speakers and store sound systems for more than a month now.

It's retailers' way of trying to put customers in a holiday state of mind hoping their wallets will follow.

Anthony Liuzzo, professor of business and economics at the Jay S. Sidhu School of Business and Technology at Wilkes University, said that festive feelings and spending go hand-in-hand.

"Anything that gets us into the holiday spirit helps sales," Liuzzo said, also noting that cooler weather also helps move the season along.

"The retailers are competing with each other," he said, "and each one is trying to outdo the other getting people into their stores."

While discounter Wal-Mart began playing holiday music in early November to coincide with holiday advertising, JCPenney only began playing an entire slate of holiday music the week of Thanksgiving.

"Up through (Nov. 23), we were about half and half with holiday music," JCPenney spokesman Tim Lyons said, noting that the company switched to complete holiday arrangements the Sunday before Thanksgiving.

"It helps to set a festive tone for Christmas shopping," Lyons said. "We think it's something people hear and they relate to ... and puts them in the holiday mind-set."

Lyons pointed out that customers have come to expect holiday music while Christmas shopping, which led the retailer to start sporadic holiday music in early November and increase it as the season progresses.

"I think it's more driven by customer behavior than us trying to drive that behavior," he said.

At the Laurel Mall in Hazleton, however, the music means a combination of things, as General Manager Ammee Reusing said.

"We began playing our (holiday) music on Nov. 3 third this year. But the reason is because our Christmas decor went up the day before," she said.

“Our holiday display is a pretty big undertaking which we normally try to plan in advance for the first one or two weeks of November. First thing the next morning, we always start with the holiday music.”

Reusing said that she hasn't heard any complaints about the early Christmas music.

“Most people seem to like it. I've heard some shoppers walking and humming along, myself included. Maybe some of the workers here are a little weary, but I think even they like it,” she said with a laugh.

At Kmart in the mall, sales manager Bob Olson said there have really been no comments on the music one way or the other.

Holiday jingles at the discount store began the week before Thanksgiving on an intermittent basis, and from now through Christmas will play consistently, Olson said.

Liuzzo noted that if holiday music is being overplayed, it may actually have a negative effect on consumers.

“It certainly helps after Thanksgiving,” Liuzzo said, “Overall, I don't think it helps.”

“It can actually turn people off,” he said.

However, local radio stations are betting listeners won't be turned off by holiday music.

“Everybody wants to ... get in the holiday spirit,” Magic 93 program director Stan Phillips said. Magic 93 started its holiday palate at 9 a.m. Nov. 24.

Meanwhile, Cool 92 and 100 began their holiday-music offerings at 4 p.m. on Halloween.

Eric Logan, special projects manager for Times-Shamrock Communications, owner of Cool 92 and 100, said listeners tune in for the good cheer.

“The big thing is,” Logan said, “from a rating standpoint, usually playing Christmas music is a boon.”

“There's been a ratings benefit every time we've done it,” he said.

The company dropped its holiday music selection in 2007 but resumed the tradition this year. Times-Shamrock also owns the Standard-Speaker and other newspapers in northeastern Pennsylvania.

And while there is a bump in ratings, Phillips said that isn't the driving force behind Magic's altered playlist.

Arbitron, which monitors radio listenership, agrees that more people tune in to holiday music — and that number goes up as Christmas approaches.

An Arbitron study in 2002 and 2005 found that listeners start looking for holiday music en masse after Thanksgiving.

However, Phillips said ratings isn't the driving factor for Magic 93's format switch.

“We just think, for the image of the radio station, it works out really well,” Phillips said.

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