

Limbaugh's Dirty Little Secret of Radio "Success"

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Ever wonder why **Rush "Boss" Limbaugh's** syndicated radio show is all over the place like the proverbial cheap suit?

If you do much driving in rural areas -- e.g. between cities -- "Boss" Limbaugh's bloviations are often the only thing you can pick up on a car radio. Hey, that's what CD players are for.

Did Rush accrue hundreds of local radio affiliates across the country because his political views are mainstream? That's obviously not it. OK, so why IS his show so "popular?" Why do hundreds of stations around the country carry his show, the most widely syndicated talkfest in the country?

Glad you asked.

The real story is not generally well-known. The only reason I know is through my covering the business of radio for years for several major daily newspapers and also, for industry trade magazines like *Radio World*.

It's because -- ready for this? -- Rush's show was, and presumably still is, given away for free to many local radio stations.

This shocker is because of a little-known practice in broadcast syndication called a "barter deal." (Barter deals were briefly mentioned in [Michael Wolff's first-rate recent piece](#) on Rush in *Vanity Fair*).

Here's how a barter deal works: To launch the show, Limbaugh's syndicator, Premiere Radio Networks -- the same folks who syndicate *wingnut du jour* Glen Beck -- gave Limbaugh's three hours away -- that's right, no cash -- to local radio stations, mostly in medium and smaller markets, back in the early 1990's.

So, a local talk station got Rush's show for zilch. In exchange, Premiere took for itself much of the local station's available advertising time (roughly 15 minutes an hour) and packed the show with national ads it had already pre-sold.

Think Gold Bond Medicated Powder.

It's a very sweet deal for local radio station owners, explained Bill Exline a respected radio broker (he helped people buy and sell local stations). "Not only does the local station get three hours of free programming," Exline explained, "but that's one less local talk-show host on staff they need. It makes small- and medium-market radio properties more profitable and attractive by cutting down staff expenses."

Shocking, isn't it, that Limbaugh would allow jobs to be cut to advance his dubious career? Not to mention helping to make small radio stations far less local?

Major-market right-wing talk stations, like San Francisco's [KSFO-AM](#) ("Reichstag Radio") have to pay actual money, of course, to carry Boss Limbaugh's daily proclamation-a-thon. (Note: KSFO, which I referred to as "Sieg Heil on Your Dial" in my column when it first switched to righty talk, is the same station that gave hatemonger **Michael Savage** his first radio megaphone).

Radio sources say that small- and medium-market stations still get Limbaugh's show for free, or pay only a token amount of cash for it. I asked **Michael Harrison**, editor of radio-syndicator-friendly [Talkers](#) magazine about this, and he claimed he didn't know how many Limbaugh affiliates still barter.

So, when you hear Rush bellowing as you're passing through Birdseed Junction, Beanblossom, or Pyrite, just remember: The radio station's getting what it paid for. Or, more accurately, DIDN'T pay for.