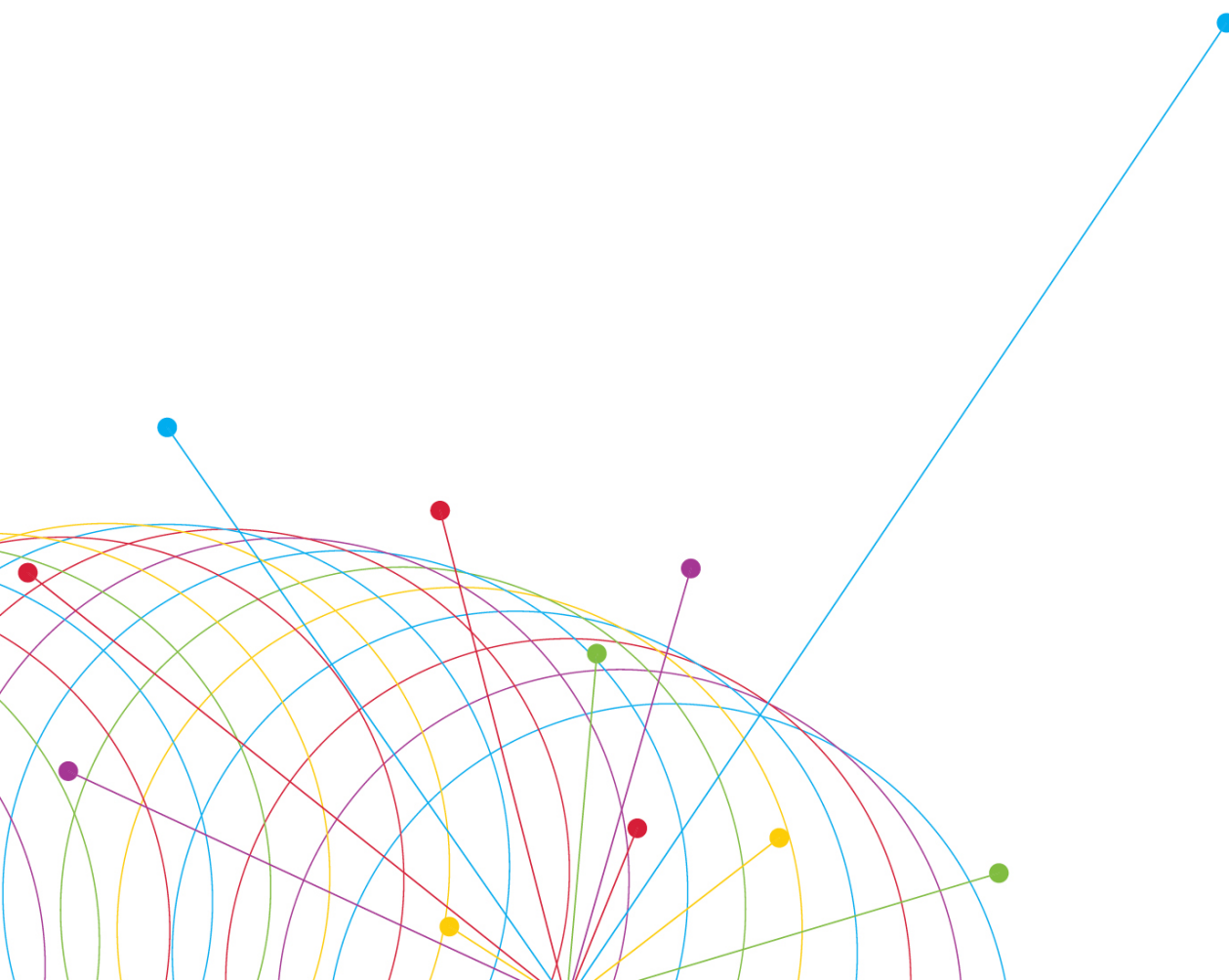




AN UNCOMMON SENSE  
OF THE CONSUMER™

# DIARY RATING DISTORTION & RATING BIAS HANDBOOK

NIELSEN SPECIAL STATION ACTIVITIES GUIDELINES FOR  
RADIO STATIONS



## INTRODUCTION

The broadcasting industry relies on the results of listener surveys for estimates of the size and composition of radio audiences. Station activities that undermine the credibility of this system of audience measurement have the potential to undermine both the perceived value of radio as an advertising medium and the credibility of radio as an honest, indispensable provider of entertainment and information.

To help maintain the integrity of radio listener estimates and, by extension, the credibility of radio as a healthy and dynamic medium, Nielsen has developed Special Station Activities guidelines in cooperation with radio broadcasters, advertisers, and other industry groups. These guidelines are intended to help radio broadcasters avoid activities that have the potential to bias survey participants or distort survey results.

This Handbook outlines Nielsen's Special Station Activities guidelines and provides examples that radio broadcasters, advertisers, and other users of Nielsen's listener estimates may find helpful. The Handbook does not attempt, however, to provide an exhaustive code of conduct. The creativity of radio broadcasters and the ever-changing nature of the radio industry prevent any handbook from providing an all-encompassing list of activities to be avoided. Rather, the Handbook provides guidance to those seeking to preserve the value of listener estimates as a tool for decision making.

## PREFACE

Any radio station activity that may sensitize or bias radio listeners in connection with the survey process, or that may distort survey results, is subject to Nielsen's Rating Distortion and Rating Bias guidelines. These include station activities that take place on social media.

Please keep in mind that the examples contained in this Handbook are not all-inclusive, are illustrative only, and should not be construed as the absolute limits of the scope of Nielsen's Special Station Activities guidelines or what determination Nielsen may make with regard to any particular event or set of circumstances.

## PRE-REVIEWS

Nielsen recommends a confidential Pre-Review of station promotional activities as the single most effective means of avoiding activities with Rating Distortion or Rating Bias potential.

## QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

### WHAT IS RATING DISTORTION?

Any station activity that Nielsen believes may affect the way diarykeepers record their listening, so that recorded listening differs from actual listening, is considered Rating Distortion. Rating Distortion includes station activities through which the station has the potential to: learn the identity of diarykeepers; gain access to, or influence over, current or upcoming survey diaries; or prompt the use of diaries for purposes other than those intended by Nielsen.

Rating Distortion activities may take the form of Diarykeeper Solicitation, Improper Promotional Activities, or any other activity prompting diarykeepers to overreport, underreport, or misreport their listening.

**Diarykeeper Solicitation** is an attempt by, or on behalf of, a station which encourages diarykeepers to record listening that differs from their actual listening. It may take the form of a public or private appeal for diarykeepers to surrender their diaries or to misreport in *any* way their actual listening to any station. Some examples of activities with this type of Rating Distortion potential would be:

- An offer to “buy” Nielsen diaries from the public.
- Asking listeners to submit their diaries as contest entry forms or using the diary as “proof” of the length of listening.
- Asking survey participants to misrepresent their household composition.
- Instructing listeners to report a specific amount of listening. (For example, “If anyone asks, tell them you listen to this station for three hours every day.”)
- Instructing listeners not to list specific stations in their diaries.
- Requesting listeners to “support” or “help” the station in the ratings by reporting more listening.

**Improper Promotional Activities** are activities that, without necessarily appealing directly to diarykeepers, may nevertheless prompt diarykeepers to overreport, underreport, or misreport their actual listening. Some examples of activities with this type of Rating Distortion potential would be:

- Contest rules that award larger prizes (or a greater opportunity to win) based on larger amounts of listening claimed or written down.
- Discussions that emphasize the importance of extensive listening in diaries. (These may include unsolicited talk show conversations, or columns or articles by radio station personnel in any medium, that discuss the radio survey process.)
- Contests or promotions that may cause diarykeepers to mistake their diaries for entry forms (possibly through resemblance to a diary or ambiguous contest instructions).
- Promotions which suggest that specific listening took place, even if listeners are not instructed to report that listening (for example, “WAAA – the station you listened to all day at work today”).

### Is “hypoing” a form of Rating Distortion?

Rating Distortion is sometimes confused with “hypoing.” Rating Distortion involves station activities that may prompt diarykeepers to report listening which differs from their actual listening. Hypoing refers to station activities designed to prompt more actual listenership during the survey period. Rating Distortion is cited under Nielsen’s Special Station Activities guidelines; hypoing is not.

## WHAT IS RATING BIAS?

Any announcement, statement, or activity that may differentially prompt listeners to a particular station to participate in Nielsen's survey (relative to listeners to other stations), or that may sensitize listeners to the process of recording listening in diaries, is considered Rating Bias.

Rating Bias activities may take the form of direct Survey Announcements (described below), but more typically are accomplished through less direct statements or activities targeted to potential diarykeepers. All such activities threaten the objectivity of the survey process – not because listeners will necessarily be prompted to misreport their listening – but because listeners to a station engaged in a Rating Bias activity may be:

- *Differentially* prompted to participate in Nielsen's survey (that is, the station's listeners may be more likely to participate in the survey than listeners to other stations).
- *Differentially* sensitized to report their listening (in other words, the station's listeners may report their listening to that station differently than their listening to other stations).

Consequently, Nielsen is concerned about any station activity that prompts diarykeepers to report their listening (as opposed to activities prompting potential audience members to listen to a station).

**Survey Announcements** are messages delivered by a radio station in any medium which alert listeners that a survey is, or soon will be, in progress or which emphasize the importance of participation in radio rating surveys – regardless of whether the announcements include the words "Nielsen" or "diary." Frequently, in fact, such announcements will urge survey participants to be "honest" or "accurate" in reporting their listening. Such instructions do not negate an announcement's potential to bias the survey. Some examples of activities with this type of Rating Bias potential would be:

- "Over the next few weeks, audience surveys will be conducted in this area. If you're asked to participate, we urge you to report all of your radio listening as completely and accurately as possible."
- "If you're keeping a rating diary, this is WAAA."
- "If you get a radio survey in the mail, don't throw it out – fill it out!"
- "We won't be talking about this on the air, but as a member of WAAA's Loyal Listener Club, it's important that you participate in any radio survey that you can."

**Indirect Appeals** to diarykeepers may make no specific reference to rating surveys or Nielsen, but may nonetheless differentially affect the way diarykeepers report their listening to the station presenting the message.

Such messages sometimes urge listeners to keep track of their listening or to tell others about their listening. Other indirect appeals use language or graphics that suggest or describe the survey process, or which emphasize that the station's success depends on listeners reporting their listening. Some examples of activities with this type of Rating Bias potential would be:

- "If you're keeping track of your listening, this is WAAA, your number one station for classic rock."
- "Dear Diary: Listened to All News WAAA."
- "And remember, when anyone asks you your favorite station, write down WAAA."
- Direct-mail pieces or print ads that resemble a Nielsen diary.
- Promotions for contests in which prizes are reminiscent of Nielsen's name, materials, or methodology.

**Other Rating Bias Activities:** Although many Rating Bias activities consist of preplanned, stylized, or repeated announcements, Rating Bias may also take other forms if, in Nielsen’s opinion, the activity may sensitize the diarykeeper to Nielsen surveys. Occasionally, for example, callers to live radio call-in programs ask questions or make statements relating to the Nielsen survey, diarykeeping, radio survey methodology, or similar topics. By responding to such questions in a way that prolongs or expands the discussion of these topics, stations may be conducting Rating Bias activities.

Sourcing of previous survey information in the form of advertising that promotes a station’s success in prior surveys, as permitted by contractual agreement with Nielsen, does not constitute Rating Bias. Note, however, that references to a station’s performance in prior surveys in the context of appeals for support, or other indirect references to the survey process, are not protected under this guideline and may, in fact, be cited by Nielsen as activities with Rating Bias potential.

#### HOW WILL NIELSEN RESPOND TO RATING DISTORTION OR RATING BIAS?

Nielsen may delist from its reports, computer tapes, and other services the call letters and listener estimates of any station determined by Nielsen to have engaged in activities with Rating Distortion or Rating Bias potential.

Rating Distortion or Rating Bias activities may result in:

- A special notice in Nielsen’s reports
- A flag by the station’s audience estimates
- “Below-the-Line” listing – placement of a station’s audience estimates out of alphabetical sequence in the market report, below a special distinguishing line
- Delistment

Activities may be cited as Rating Distortion or Rating Bias, regardless of whether they are broadcast over the air or communicated through other media.

#### HOW DO I REQUEST A PRE-REVIEW OF MY STATION’S PLANNED ACTIVITY?

The Special Station Activities Committee offers confidential Pre-Reviews of promotional materials by telephone, e-mail, or mail. We continue to recommend Pre-Reviews of station promotional materials as the single most effective means of avoiding activities with Rating Distortion or Rating Bias potential.

Stations will be advised of potential Rating Bias and Rating Distortion concerns inherent in the material presented to us. However, because the *context* of a statement or graphic can alter its potential to bias survey participants or distort survey results, the manner in which such activities are implemented may raise concerns necessitating further review. A station activity which varies from that presented for Pre-Review may raise concerns warranting notification to report users (via any of the methods previously outlined). Stations are therefore encouraged to request an additional Pre-Review if planned activities are likely to change.

#### HOW DO I REQUEST AN INQUIRY INTO AN ACTIVITY BY ANOTHER STATION?

Nielsen’s Special Station Activities Committee will review any correspondence and accompanying material that document a station activity. The correspondence should be on station or group letterhead, should include the sender’s position or company affiliation, and should include a complete description of the activity, as follows:

- Call letters of the station conducting the activity
- Date(s) and frequency of the activity, and (if available) the start and stop times of the activity

- Type of activity (announcement, contest, promotion, etc.)
- Media used (on-air, direct mail, newspaper, Internet, etc.)
- Sample(s) of the activity (air-check, newspaper ad, website address, etc.)

Stations requesting an inquiry may feel free to discuss the issue by telephone at (410) 312-8396 before proceeding with formal correspondence. All correspondence and documentation (from stations requesting an inquiry) must be received no later than the last day of the survey. It is Nielsen's policy not to disclose the identity of stations requesting Special Station Activities inquiries, unless required by law to do so.

#### **HOW WILL NIELSEN RESPOND?**

The Committee will review all correspondence and documentation to determine whether a formal inquiry is warranted. If the activity in question appears to possess Rating Distortion and/or Rating Bias potential, a formal inquiry will be conducted to gather and verify complete details before a final evaluation is made.

Once the station responds, the Committee evaluates all available information. If no response is forthcoming, the Committee will base its decision on the information available from other sources. The Committee will determine whether the station activity possesses Rating Distortion and/or Rating Bias potential and, if so, designates the action(s) to be taken.

## ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

Recurring station activities may have greater Rating Distortion and/or Rating Bias potential than isolated activities. As a result, an activity that a station repeats (or multiple different activities by a station) may warrant more prominent notification than a similar isolated activity.

Nielsen will review, for Rating Distortion and/or Rating Bias potential, activities conducted at *any* time (not just during, or immediately prior to, a survey) if, in Nielsen's judgment, the activity has the potential to undermine the integrity of the survey. In order to allow for a thorough review, activities that occur near the end of a survey period may, at Nielsen's discretion, be noted in reports covering survey periods subsequent to that in which the activity occurred. Nielsen may also note the activity in more than one report (i.e., for more than one survey or in more than one market) if, in Nielsen's judgment, users of these reports should be alerted to the activity.

Nielsen's professional interest and involvement in the area of Special Station Activities are not limited to surveys of the syndicated radio markets. Users of *Radio County Coverage* and other reports that may include non-syndicated sample may need to be alerted to activities conducted by stations in their listening areas.

The initiation of an inquiry at any time is solely within the discretion of Nielsen.

Activities noted for one station may also be noted for additional stations on which the specific programming segment was also broadcast because of simulcast, syndication, network, or other relevant relationships.

Activities noted in Nielsen's reports may or may not have actually affected reported listening. Such an effect would be virtually impossible to prove or disprove and Nielsen makes no attempt to do so. Activities with Rating Distortion and/or Rating Bias potential are nonetheless inherently detrimental to the broadcast, advertising, and audience measurement industries. The fact that such activities occurred may undermine confidence in listener estimates and constitutes sufficient reason to notify report users of their occurrence.

Nielsen reserves the right to draw attention to any station activity that, in Nielsen's opinion, has the potential to undermine the integrity of the survey, even though the activity does not meet any of the specific criteria outlined above. Nielsen further reserves the right to take other appropriate action, depending upon the content, context, frequency, or repetition of the activity.

## CONTACT INFORMATION

Nielsen welcomes questions and comments on our Rating Distortion and Rating Bias guidelines.

Requests for inquiries into documented station activities, requests for confidential Pre-Reviews of planned station promotions, or questions or comments about our guidelines, may be addressed to:

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