

The Lone Ranger: Building the national market one icon at a time.

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Historical accounts of the popularization of early 20th Century icons like the Lone Ranger, Little Orphan Annie, or Buck Rogers tend to presume that these properties successfully took advantage of the national networking possibilities emerging out of the radio and publishing industries in order to become overnight “American” heroes. In actuality, the Lone Ranger’s path to becoming a national cultural icon was quite literally forged town by town, or more accurately, market by market, and not because of the reach of a centralized national delivery system.

Throughout the late 1930s, the Lone Ranger, Incorporated (LRI) went market-to-market contracting independent radio stations to purchase the transcribed radio program on a sustaining basis while offering them marketing assistance in order to procure a sponsor. By 1938, the Lone Ranger was heard coast-to-coast on 107 different radio stations without the benefit of a national network and had procured 42 separate sponsors, mostly regional bakeries in non-competing markets. More than a mere broadcasting phenomenon, LRI sought to use the Lone Ranger radio series as a catalyst for building localized synergistic brand communities that worked together to promote the Lone Ranger as a cultural and business icon. Soon after the radio series would be introduced, the Lone Ranger film serial, comic strip, and other myriad consumer products often found their way into these towns. In the absence of a horizontally integrated media system, LRI sought to coach its diverse clientele, consisting of local radio stations, film exhibitors, newspaper publishers, retailers and sponsors, to work together to cross-promote one another’s product(ion)s, thus steering consumers across media and merchandizing platforms and collectively elevating the Lone Ranger above any of these distinct sites. This was not always an easy task since some local media providers perceived one another as direct competitors for consumer attention and advertiser spending.

In order to cultivate these localizable synergies, LRI had to first convince independent radio stations, regional sponsors and other local media outlets that the Lone Ranger was a viable alternative to centrally-distributed national network programming, and that the property could address local market tastes and values without sacrificing its national reputation. In effect, LRI had to demonstrate that the Lone Ranger could become a valuable contributing member of the communities it sought to profit from. Thus, LRI had to be attuned to the needs and concerns of sponsors, broadcasters and retailers targeting local communities, especially as these coalesced around fears that the national networks would hijack promotional outlets and resources from local businesses and that discreet populations would reject content and marketing that did not speak to their local identities. The Lone Ranger Safety Club (LRSC) would prove the lynchpin in LRI’s efforts to extend the property into these new markets.

LRI sought to heighten consumer investment in the Lone Ranger by encouraging radio sponsors to invest resources in launching local chapters of the LRSC, which promoted traffic awareness amongst children. Safety Clubs were (paradoxically) designed to provide targeted sites for merchandizing, to off-set parental concerns over children’s commercial culture by using the Lone Ranger’s popularity to teach appropriate

civic and moral lessons, and most importantly, to transform the Lone Ranger from a mere set of products and texts that children could consume into a friend and community leader that children could build their daily lived experiences around. Marketing for the LRSC was designed to simultaneously emphasize the Lone Ranger's national success and local presence, with ad copy that quite literally played upon the masked man's imminent arrival into every new town and direct address to particular chapters. The LRSC boasted membership in the millions and local chapters encouraged retailers to stalk up on Lone Ranger merchandise, film exhibitors to screen the Lone Ranger film serials, and newspaper publishers to order the Lone Ranger comic strip, all of which generated royalties for LRI. The traffic safety angle convinced local civic leaders to not only endorse the clubs, but to partner with the Lone Ranger and his sponsors to promote traffic awareness, essentially transforming the hero into an honorary and honored member of the communities in which he circulated (and by extension, his sponsors as well). Finally, Safety Clubs were designed to respond to New Deal rhetoric that manufacturers had become alienated from their consumer base and required federal oversight to regulate their practices. Safety Clubs modeled an alternative relationship between industry and consumers that branded sponsors as civically engaged and essential to community growth.

Despite LRI's engagement with these local concerns the company did not forsake a national market. Rather, it chose to pursue an alternate route in attaining it; one which allowed LRI to maximize profits amongst licensees within each market while utilizing the merchandizing fanfare it generated to cultivate interest in adjacent markets. In 1939, LRI's gross receipts from licensing the rights to the Lone Ranger radio series exceeded \$1,000,000. These earnings did not include income from merchandising (\$100,000), premium development (\$50,000), or other media adaptations (\$100,000 for the comic strip alone). In total the LRI's net worth was estimated as \$400,000 (that's \$62,652,494 when converted to 2008 monies). While each of its licenses separately ensured that the Lone Ranger had national coverage in a variety of media and product forms, it was LRI's market-by-market attempts to generate cross-promotional brand synergies that transformed the Lone Ranger into a national brand. More than this, it was LRI's tactical customization of the Lone Ranger radio program to meet local market needs and concerns that allowed the property to become culturally iconic.

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