

QSL's From The Other Side of the Coin

Les Rayburn NRC/IRCA Broadcast Test Coordinator

In our effort to make it easier for stations to agree to include us in their maintenance plans, we have lately offered to take on the duties of responding to reception reports if they do not have the resources, time, or desire to undertake it themselves. This experience has given me the unique experience of being on the receiving end of verification requests from DX'ers...and I've learned some lessons that I think may be useful for those interested in obtaining QSL's.

WDAB DX Test: Lessons Learned

In February of 2006, WDAB conducted a maintenance test and Paul Walker arranged for them to include test material including phonetic voice identifications, sweep tones, and Morse Code IDs. WDAB conducted the test at 5KW daytime power and on their non-directional pattern. The test was widely heard throughout the US and Canada.

The station is small, and with limited resources asked if we could handle the QSL duties directly. We agreed and when the test was announced, we posted the following QSL instructions (verbatim):

Reception reports are desired via e-mail (first choice) and snail mail (only if e-mail is not available) Station would prefer to receive recordings of the test (MP3, CD, or cassette). Submit reports to: les@highnoonfilm.com

Please put "WDAB DX Test" in the subject line.

All standard mail reports should go to:

Les Rayburn

High Noon Film

100 Centerview Drive Suite 111

Birmingham, AL 35216

While these instructions are obviously coming from a volunteer, who is also a DX'er himself, they are not dissimilar to instructions I've received from stations. More and more, folks would prefer to verify receptions via e-mail and the easiest way for them to be sure that you heard them is to listen to a recording. This isn't the case for everyone, maybe not even the majority, but it's the trend. Apple has sold a ton of those little I-Pod things, so it's safe to assume that MP3's are here to stay ... while cassette recorders are getting harder to find.

In the case of the WDAB test, the instructions were designed for one reason, to make my life easy. Pure and simple. I run a television production company and don't have a lot of time for my hobby. So the instructions were designed to make it easy for me handle the QSL chores.

If a station is answering your request directly the same principal applies. Imagine the over-worked engineer who may be taking care of multiple stations, with no assistants to answer mail. He's pressed for time and couldn't care less about your hobby...so how do we approach this guy to get our QSL?

Make it easy for him to answer. Let's see how DX'ers did in that department with the QSL requests that I received.

Total Reports received: 78· % received via standard US Mail: 45%

Right off the bat, we've got some obstacles. Remember, the station asked for reports to be sent via email, and only if that wasn't an option, send them via US Mail. But in reality about half of my mail reports were from people who also reported via e-mail!

Why? I assume that these folks really wanted a printed QSL card, rather than the .JPEG Picture file attachment that was sent via e-mail. In reality, there is no difference. Both are created in Photoshop, and for US Mail requests, I simply print them out on an ink-jet printer. Anyone who receives the file attachment via e-mail can do the same. But the impact to the station is very real. I spent almost \$35 dollars in ink cartridges printing out the mailed request vs. pennies for the e-mail replies. Printing, addressing envelopes, applying postage, etc. took at least three hours of my personal time ... while answering the e-mails was done during a single lunch hour.

As an experiment for this article, I grabbed ten US Mail requests at random to look at which ones had made it easiest for me to reply. My criteria was simple...I was looking for DX'ers who had made it easier for me to respond. I wanted a detailed written report or a clear, short recording on CD. And I wanted them to have included a self addressed stamped envelope so that I didn't have to spend time addressing letters.

Here are the results of grabbing ten requests at random. Names have been omitted to protect the innocent.

1. No SASE. Clear written report. Return postage included.
2. No SASE. Clear written report. Return postage included.
3. No problem at all. SASE, CD with short audio clip.
4. No SASE. Cassette tape used. Tape not "cued" to the start of best reception, so I spent almost 30 minutes listening for sweep tones and code.
5. No SASE. No return postage included. Cassette tape, also not cued...and this one even included audio from other frequencies. I was confused for almost an hour and I'm a DX'er!

6. No SASE. Return postage included. Cassette used but cued to short audio clip.
7. No SASE. Return postage included. Cassette used but test was easily heard throughout.
8. No Problems! SASE included. CD with MP3 audio clips, short, easy to verify.
9. NO SASE. CD audio included. Short clips.
10. Cassette...recorded almost a half hour before the test began...and tape not cued. No return postage included. Verifying this report and returning reply took over an hour.

Easy to see where some folks went wrong, right? Granted, my instructions did not specify that I wanted an SASE included, or that CD's were preferred to cassettes. But I think an SASE is just common courtesy and the best bet of all to have a report verified. For me, cassette players have become relics. I have two teenage children, both in college. In none of our cars or our home is there a single cassette player remaining. I eventually borrowed one from the editorial production vendor that we use for our television work.

It's also hard to understand why anyone would send a tape with over an hour's worth of audio to a station, especially without cueing it first to the section where the test signal is clearest. Who has time to listen to that much audio? Certainly not many engineers or station managers.

Those who sent reports by e-mail also made some mistakes. Among those were the following examples:

Very large sound files sent via e-mail. One was over 18 megs in size, which many Internet Service Providers (ISP's) would never allow to be delivered. Do a Google search to find free encoders to turn those huge .wav files into small .mp3 files.

Unusual sound formats. I received recordings in Real Media (.rm), AIFF, and even .AVI formats. Since I work in television, I have software to allow me to play virtually any format...but I would not assume that is the same for the average radio station. The safest choices are .MP3, and .WAV. Try to keep files sizes under 4 Megs.

Reception reports sent to the various e-mail lists, rather than directly to my e-mail address as requested. If I hit the "reply" button, my response and your QSL card are going to be sent to the IRCA list or the NRC list, etc..etc. If you want a QSL card, send the report directly the station or their representative.

Broadcast Test Coordinator Soapbox

Our hobby is in a state of change. In order for us to be successful as DX'ers in the future, we are going to have to learn new techniques and we're also going to have to conduct ourselves in a manner that demonstrates the utmost courtesy for broadcasters. My father would have said, "put yourself in the other guy's shoes".

If you want a station to respond to your request for a QSL or verification letter, make it easy for them to do so with a minimum amount of time, effort, or money being expended. With my new found viewpoint on the other end of the request, I'd offer the following advice:

If the station asks for e-mail reports then do everything in your power to accommodate them. Libraries offer free Internet access almost everywhere in the country. Set up a free e-mail account using services like Yahoo (www.yahoo.com) or MSN (www.hotmail.com).

Using the US Mail? Make it easy for them to reply. Include a self addressed stamped envelope (SASE) If you fear that you'll miss out on those stickers or other goodies that won't fit into a business sized envelope, then simply send a larger one with plenty of postage. Hey, you're the one who wants this stuff. Why make it hard on the station?

Send a compact disc (CD) instead of a cassette. Face it, everyone has a CD ... not everyone has a cassette player these days. If you don't have a computer, find a friend who is willing to dub them to a CD for you.

If you must send a cassette, then make the recording as short as possible. "Cue" the tape to the point where the signal is clearest. Don't expect anyone to listen to a half hour of static trying to pick out some weak code or a voice ID.

Be polite. I responded to QSL requests to WDAB within nine days of the test, but had already received four "follow up" e-mails and one letter wondering when the QSL's would go out. Get real...give the station at least 30 days before sending out any follow up.

Be polite. If the card is late, very late, or never comes at all...don't spoil the hobby by sending out nasty follow up letters or saying how disappointed you are that they can't make time to verify your reports. QSL's are the bonus prize... and we need to view them as such.

On a positive note, along with many of the written reception reports many included cash (more than enough to pay postage—all of which I returned), station stickers, items that showed me what their part of the country was like (brochures, maps), etc. Almost ever letter included sincere thanks and words of encouragement. Likewise, hardly an e-mail report was received that didn't include a big "Thank you", which we passed along to WDAB. Even with the extra time and effort required to provide the verifications, I certainly enjoyed the experience. It was fascinating to hear what the station sounded like from various parts of the country. It was interesting to compare the sound of a Drake R8B to that of a Sony 2010. Encouraging to hear that most DX'er have to deal with at least as much noise as I do in Alabama...and satisfying to be part of arranging a test that was widely heard. Here's to future DX tests and receiving QSL's from all of them!