

Guest Operating – Tips, Tricks, and Best Practices; Told Through Failure and Success.

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Let's be honest, we all wish our antennas were bigger. There is always a new antenna plan in the works; be it a better feedline, or a whole new antenna project to make our station better for the next contest. I personally have a very modest home station (A big thank you to my parents is appropriate here. After all, I do not own a house and all of my ham radio ambitions have been possible with their blessings). My station is equipped with a few wires hidden in the trees, an Icom radio, and an amplifier on loan from a generous mentor. It certainly isn't KC1XX, but I can have a lot of fun. Not all of us are lucky enough to have our own contest superstation. You have a dipole in your attic, or a vertical in the backyard, or even stacked 80m beams. It doesn't matter; sometimes we hunt for the opportunity to use someone else's bigger, better, or more optimally located stations.

Most of my "serious" (for me) is done at other people's stations. In recent years I have had the privilege of operating well known stations such as K1VR, VY1JA, K1LZ, K1TTT, K1IR, K3LR and K6ND. These station hosts have opened their doors to me, and for that I am eternally grateful.

Finding Stations to Operate

Joining a M/M team!

Multi-op stations are often looking for operators. The local contest club's M/M always needs an extra operator. I don't expect to be given the 20m run chair on the first outing. Be willing to "buy in" to a team and put your time in doing the less-than-peak-fun activities. Perhaps offer to come operate late at night and relieve other operators. We have to start from somewhere. The more one gets to operate with a given team, the better opportunities one can get.

Reach Out and Ask!

If you see that a station is not being used, that someone is travelling, or whatever the situation may be, see if the station owner will let you pilot their station while they are unable. This is especially effective to generate points for the club competition in the

major DX contests. There is nothing more satisfying than putting a station on the air that otherwise would not be.

Work It Off!

Consider helping out a station owner who could use assistance in exchange for the privilege of operating their station. If you're comfortable doing tower work, or are a logging software wizard, there is certainly a skill you have for which you can "trade". For me, I have often offered to help less technical station owners with their computers or other technical projects. They then get the help they need to generate other scores, and I can snag the use of their station for a contest or two. I feel this model works best when all parties feel like they are getting some sort of value out of the arrangement. This is a method I have perused quite successfully!

Getting Ready to Operate

This is the most important part of operating someone else's station. There is more preparation involved with operating someone else's station. Going into any contest, you are at a distinct disadvantage operating a station that is not your own. Station familiarity is key to doing well. I find that a long conversation with the station owner goes a long way in your success.

Questions to Keep in Mind

What bands work best? What are the station's weaknesses? The station owner will always know what doesn't work the best. Maybe 80 meters is not runnable with their antenna, or it's hard to hold a frequency that is low on 20m. Finding this information early will help you strategize for the contest.

Will you have any important propagation windows? Are there any "non-standard" openings to make sure that you work during the contest, that you may not be familiar with? For us on the East Coast, that may be a low band JA window. This can also depend on the type of antenna. When are certain antenna combinations best, and what heading should you be beaming? Sometimes, especially with complex terrain, the most effective beam headings or antenna combination is not what you would expect.

Are there any unique station quirks? What about that 80m dipole that causes the telephones in the house to ring, waking the station owner's family at European sunrise? If it is an SO2R station, is there inter-station interference? Weird software bugs? I

remember operating a station once that used a certain brand of automatic amplifiers that had the propensity to fault. Little did I know, since I wasn't looking at the amp controls, that I had been running QRP power on 80 meters for over fifteen minutes! These quick items to keep in mind will save you later!

Leading Up to The Contest

I always like to make at least one or two pre-contest visits to the station I will be operating, if it is local. Those visits give me the chance to set up the radios, amplifiers, logging software, and the like to make sure all is working well. Making sure the station is working perfectly before the contest allows you to relax and get some rest before it starts. I like to check the DVK, amp tuning, antenna SWRs, and SO2R audio during that time. During one of these visits, I also make a point of going outside and walking the antenna farm to both familiarize myself with it and spot any damage. Be sure to check in with the station host as to what callsign to use.

Make Sure You Are Invited Back

It is important to remember some basic rules when operating someone else's station. There are two aspects to this. One of which is producing a good contest result, and the latter (which is significantly more important, even when it conflicts with the first of these two goals) is to make sure you leave a good impression. There is no better way to ruin a friendship than to be a bad guest operator. Remember, you are a guest in someone else's house. Clean up after yourself. Make sure you understand the house rules. What is off-limits? I like to bring a radio book or gadget as a gift for my host. If you sleep in a guest bedroom, find out how the owner wants it left.

Leave everything better than when you found it. If you made any changes to the station for your operation, undo those so it is the same as when you found it. The same goes for computer settings. I like to not change any logger settings. But if I do, I make sure to change them back. Nothing is more frustrating than having a guest over, and then not be able to use your station after they're gone. While it may be obvious, don't blame any operating troubles you may have on the station or your host. They, after all, are letting you use their station. During the contest is not the time to yell or complain. Be grateful. In the same vein, if you commit to operating a contest, operate! Come do what you set out to do, even if that means slogging it out to the end.

Just do it!

Guest operating can be a very rewarding way to improve your contesting skills when your own station isn't a superstation. Hopefully, you can give operating as a guest a try using these hints and tips from my experiences.