

HOW TO BE AN OSSBN NCS AND CLOSE YOUR NET ALIVE

This is being written in an attempt to give hints and ideas to prospective and newer Net Control Stations for the Ohio Single Sideband Net.

First and foremost - - - - Listen, listen, and listen! Listen to other nets. Listen to the NCS and ask yourself “How would I handle that situation?” Practice logging the check-ins to a net to which you are listening. Pretend that you are the NCS and write down the callsigns and other info as it comes storming into your headphones. That will make your actual “on-air” experience much smoother.

Second - - - Read, study, and learn the things that are presented in the “OSSBN Guidelines and Procedures” literature. There is not much text, but what is there, is the foundation upon which OSSBN operates. It would also be helpful to read “Section II: National Traffic System (NTS)” in the ARRL Public Service Communications Manual. If you learn those concepts and make them a part of your operating style, then over 90% of your task is complete.

Here are some very specific hints for you to consider:

1. Make sure that you’ve taken steps to NOT miss your net. Mark your calendar. Set an alarm clock. It’s embarrassing to miss a net when you’re NCS.
2. Before time for your net to start, make sure that all the “housekeeping” chores are completed. Is your desk cleared of unnecessary stuff? Are all your needed papers (including the Net Roster and call-up Preamble) out and ready? Do you have your paper (at least a couple of sheets) and pen ready? Is your rig tuned and ready to go? Is your UTC clock set the WWV time so that you’ll start the net on time? Have you removed as many potential distractions (spouse, kids, ringing phones, 2-meter rigs) from your work area as possible? All of the above things should be completed in time for you to have a couple of minutes to just sit at the rig, chill out, and mentally prepare to start the net.
3. At about one minute before the net is to start, key your mike and announce “This is N8XYZ standing by for OSSBN”. That tells your back-up stations that you are there and will be starting the net so that they won’t jump in there at the same time that you do. It also gives you a chance to check your meters while you are transmitting to make sure that you’re not transmitting into your dummy load (don’t laugh – it’s happened on OSSBN).
4. When the net start time arrives, key the mike and start reading the preamble for the session that you are controlling. Speak clearly and distinctly. Do NOT rush anything. YOU set the

pace – not the net. Also, be sure that you are on the net frequency of 3.9725 MHz before you transmit, but once you begin net call-up, then ALL stations are to tune on YOU! You establish the frequency to be matched. Net Control is NEVER off frequency! These things are said with the assumption that the normal net frequency of 3.9725 MHz is clear and not being occupied by others in QSO. OSSBN does not own any frequency! You may feel free to politely ask them to move, just as you would handle any other such situation like this in amateur radio, but if they won't help you, then start the net on a back-up frequency (discussed later). You might ask a volunteer station to hang around 3.9725 to “chase” OSSBN members to your back-up frequency.

5. As you call for check-ins, some may come to you faster than you can copy them. Don't be afraid to ask for repeats or clarification as needed. A check-in is NOT checked into your net until you have acknowledged him/her by CALLSIGN. Feel free to mention their name if you know it, but the important thing is to acknowledge the callsign. If they have no traffic, it is unnecessary to parrot that fact back to the net. If they have traffic, then ask them to list it and make them repeat info until you are satisfied that you have the info correctly. It is a nice touch to be able to acknowledge a check-in by name, but it is not required. A beginning NCS would do better to just acknowledge the callsign and not take net time (and also make obvious pauses) to look up a name on the roster. Their names will come with experience. No one will be offended if you acknowledge them by callsign. Callsigns R us! I have found that when they are checking in fast and furious, I can just write the callsign suffix and that is enough to jog my memory when things slow down a bit and fill in the blanks. You might also teach yourself to put some kind of mark or symbol (I use a tiny letter “w” to denote “with traffic”) behind the callsign of a station that has some kind of traffic. That will remind you to query the station to have them list their traffic.
6. In general, you should complete the “call-up” phase of the net before trying to find outlets for the traffic that has been listed. There will always be exceptions. Once you have the list of check-ins complete, you can repeat aloud a list of the traffic that is to be passed. That way, the listening stations can get mentally prepared to jump in when asked so that they can volunteer to take traffic for an area that they represent. They can also call you with additional info to correct you if you copied their info in error. If you know that a station has checked in that can handle a certain destination, you can ask him/her to call the sending station to send the traffic. Otherwise, you can just ask for a station to volunteer to handle a destination. You are NOT responsible for knowing the state's geography so well that you know all the station locations by heart, but with experience, you'll eventually get to know many of them. When you have a choice between/among several receiving stations for a certain destination, try to select the station that is newer on OSSBN, so that they can get more experience moving traffic. Don't give it to the “reliable old-timer” just because he's there and has lots of experience. The newbies need practice, too.
7. Don't be in a big hurry to key your mike. Move slowly enough that you will be less likely to “step on” another station. Try to avoid getting caught up in the natural tendency to “rush” a

net in any way. The more methodical and “plodding” a net proceeds, the more likely that traffic will be passed with fewer errors and requests for repeats. Many times, faster chatter result in slower nets due to inefficiency – especially when band conditions are poor.

8. Do NOT babble. You do not need to make small talk to be friendly. You are the “cop” directing the flow of traffic in a network of stations in which messages are transmitted from one station to their destination station(s). All you need to do is expedite the flow of traffic. Limited talk from NCS is good. An exception is during the 4:15 PM net session when traffic is slow and the net must stand by while the D8RN rep is away possibly getting traffic for your net. During that lull in business, unique, but appropriate, ways of “entertaining” or informing the net would be prudent and would also show passing stations that the frequency is in use. It is a good time for training tips and other informative input from any net members.
9. After you’ve gotten over the “start-up jitters”, don’t be afraid to develop your own personal operating style as long as your work falls within the guidelines and procedures. That will slowly evolve as you become accustomed to the job. Don’t rush it. It may take a month or two. It will also take a while for you to become familiar with callsigns and names of the regular check-in stations. Be patient. As you become more comfortable, you will also start sending stations off to another frequency to pass traffic even before the call-up is complete. As long as the traffic gets passed properly, don’t be in a hurry to develop “efficiencies”; much of that will come with time.
10. Trust nothing to your memory. It can fail you in an instant when you’re on the air. Rely heavily on your Net Roster and your net worksheet. It’s better to have too many “chicken-scratches” on your worksheet than to miss some important info that you heard but didn’t write down.
11. Develop rapport with some of the “old timers” on the net. Solicit their suggestions occasionally. They have “been there and done that”, probably more times than you’ll ever imagine. Have them suggest alternative ways of doing some specific things. If you get constructive criticism, try to not be thin-skinned about it. These folks are simply trying to help you become a better NCS; they have walked your path themselves and are just trying to share with you the things that they’ve learned over the years. On the flip side, don’t let anyone badger you unfairly or try to talk you into something that you think is not reasonable or logical or does not conform to the established procedures. In my short time as NCS, I’ve never run into one of these types on OSSBN.
12. I don’t wish to tell NCS how you should log your check-ins, but whatever techniques you use, you’ll need to be able to identify at any time the callsigns of the check-ins and their traffic, if any. You’ll want to know how many stations are checked in. You’ll want to develop a system for identifying what station is TAKING the traffic listed by a station, as well as identifying when that traffic has been passed and is no longer relevant to the net.

You might also want to have a system to tell you when you've sent stations off frequency to pass traffic and to what frequency you sent them. That won't happen too often, though.

13. If you are NCS of the 4:15 PM session, be sure to get any traffic that is listed by or must be sent to the D8RN rep passed as soon as possible. Try also to get traffic moved from/to any station that has checked in as "short time". Most of them are ops that will be involved in some way with the D8RN activity at 4:30 on 3.940 MHz..
14. Regarding the 8th Region Nets, you'll notice that each OSSBN session has provision to call for a volunteer station to attend the higher level net at a later time so that traffic leaving OSSBN or coming to Ohio can be handled. Many net sessions have a regularly scheduled 8RN rep. Some do not; then you'll need to ask (sometimes beg) for a volunteer. Once you have your 8RN rep, have him/her list any traffic he/she is bringing to your net and proceed with the call-up of the net. Once the call-up is pretty well completed, you can then have the 8RN rep call the stations that have out-going traffic and get it passed. In the 4:15 PM session, there are two reps. One is called the "D8RN rep" (also called the "Daytime 8th Region Net rep"). The other is called the "8RN rep". The D8RN rep is the one that picks up traffic to take to the 8th Region Net at 4:30 PM on 3.940 MHz. He/she should get only messages for West Virginia and Michigan – the other 8th Region states. Any other traffic should go to the 8RN rep. That rep meets the Early or the Late session of the CW 8RN that meets on 3.530 MHz at 7:45 PM or 9:30 PM. If you know that there is a lot of traffic coming into Ohio, it is sometimes prudent to send a second op to the 4:30 D8RN to help out. A skilled rep will come back to your net and ask for help if he/she thinks that help will be needed. Count on them; they usually know what they're doing.
15. When there is a lot of traffic to be passed on your net, feel free to move stations off to another frequency to pass it. It will take some experience to determine when and how that should be done. In general, you want to send two or more stations that you feel confident have the station (antenna) and the skills to hear and be well-heard by the others in the group so that you don't have to worry about them fighting to hear every word being transmitted. Don't be afraid to send a third station along that has "good ears" to act as a relay between two that have trouble hearing one another. If the band is really crappy or crowded, it is usually best to stay on net frequency. The main secondary frequency is 3.968 MHz. Others in lesser order of usage are: 3.964, 3.960, and 3.978. Never send ops to 3.976; there are usually QSOs there.
16. When the band is marginal and stations have trouble hearing one another, you'll frequently need to get a third station to relay from the sender to the receiver. It is VERY important that you ascertain that the relay station can hear the sender and that the receiving station can hear the relay station. If the receiving station cannot hear the relay station, then it is irrelevant that the relay station hears the receiving station fine. That's because the traffic is going primarily one direction. You must establish the "hearing" capabilities of stations in the

direction that traffic is flowing. This concept might seem trivial, but it can bite you easily, and it does take some practice to make this an automatic thought process.

17. Keep your priorities straight. Naturally, emergency or priority traffic must be handled as quickly and expeditiously as possible. Call immediately for a station that can receive such traffic if it is listed. You may wish to pass it immediately on net or to send the two stations to another frequency. That's your call, based upon band conditions, the capabilities of the stations involved, etc. Then, when the call-up is complete, try to move traffic leaving Ohio. Move next the in-state traffic. Finally can come the informals and other non-essential activity. Many times, a listed Net Announcement should be disposed of at the conclusion of the call-up, while most net members are still around and paying attention. If the traffic load is heavy, the announcement may have to wait a while. Query the station with the announcement to determine its nature and length; then you and the announcing station can ascertain the priority. NCS has the final say, though.
18. When you close the net, don't neglect to note the actual closing time on your worksheet. Otherwise, it's easy to forget. Then, while things are still fresh in your mind and your worksheet is available, make out your radiogram report to the statistician for the session in which you were NCS. The text is simple: date, number of check-in stations, number of messages passed (including your report following net IF it was properly listed during the net itself), the number of minutes that your net was in session, and the callsign of the liaison station(s). Do not feel the need to pass your net report immediately following the net. You're asked to pass it within three days of your net, so there is plenty of time to pass it on a later net. That will minimize your tendency to hurry to complete the report and possibly make mistakes.
19. In general, just keep cool and don't panic about anything. If something happens during a net that you're not sure how to handle, just ask one of the old-timers that is checked into your net. Be the boss, but don't be bossy. Always remember that when we're on OSSBN, we're always among friends. NCS should treat all check-ins as the friends that they are; NCS will always be treated with the same respect. This is a hobby! We're here for public service, so, serve and enjoy!