

TUCSON RADIO MAKING WAVES: Corporate Radio Roves In

It's 7 a.m. Do you know where your DJ is?

Many stations shun local vocals in favor of recorded segments serving mass markets. It's unclear how much listeners care.

Live and local. Radio stations used to tout being both, but with corporate restructuring and downsizing, the trend toward recording segments of shows and using syndicated programs has become increasingly prevalent both nationally and in the Tucson market.

In other words, your favorite morning team with whom you take that cup of coffee or drive to work may not be as close as you think.

Indianapolis-based Bob and Tom, who occupy the morning slot on KHYT (107.5 FM), are nationally syndicated. The a.m. teams at KOHT (98.3 FM) and KOYT (92.9 FM), Kid & Ruben S. and Tim & Willy, respectively, are based in Phoenix. And KMXZ (94.9 FM) has an unusual arrangement for its morning DJs, with longtime Tucsonan Bobby Rich interacting with his Denver-based partner Brad Behan via a monitor.

Nationally syndicated specialty shows such as the interview-based "Rockline," which airs on KPLX (96.1 FM); love-song dedication program "Delilah," on Mix FM; and Dick Clark's "Rock, Roll and Remember" on KWFM (97.1 FM) are employed by commercial stations as well.

"In general, radio was originally created by the FCC to be a local medium," said Sheryl Leanza, deputy director at Media Access Project in Washington, D.C. Consolidation and concentrated ownership "certainly (lead) to less diverse programming," she said.

The Bob and Tom show, which is owned by Clear Channel's Premiere Radio Networks, replaced locals Bobby Lewis and Wendy Sweet on KHYT last summer. "We were looking for the opportunity to bring in a show that was unlike anything else in Tucson," said Herb Crowe, operations manager at KOAZ (97.5 FM), KIIM and KHYT. "It was not a financial-based decision. We felt like there was going to be an opportunity to increase the ratings of the radio station."

Bob and Tom are syndicated in nearly 40 states. Tim & Willy are in 10 markets, including ones in New York, Ohio and Florida. To accommodate this, Tim Hattrick said that every day he and his partner record two shows.

"We do a live show for Phoenix and then we record for the

other cities. So what you're hearing in Tucson, most of it you're hearing was recorded the day before," Hattrick said.

The Kid & Ruben show, which is heard in just the Phoenix and Tucson markets, is broadcast more or less live. Breaks for Tucson news are recorded and inserted when the DJs offer Phoenix news. To handle breaking local news, Kid Stevens of Kid & Ruben said, "our producer in Tucson calls us, and then we get right on it," most likely inserting such information into the twice-hourly news segments. Kid & Ruben replaced locals Vicky Valle and Paco Jacobo in March.

"The thing is, with technology today, it enables us to get the best talent possible, we feel, for the situation," said Mike Madigan, marketing manager for Clear Channel in Tucson and Yuma. Adding Kid & Ruben, he said, was a "quality control move . . . I didn't save any money on it."

But while shifting to talent unavailable in the area may offer engaging DJs, the local part of local radio is impacted.

"Closing out all but the most successful radio personalities reduces diversity and the possibility that a new talent will come along. It reduces the possibility for people from diverse backgrounds to break into radio," Leanza said.

And whereas teams such as Tim & Willy and John & Frank make frequent appearances in the Tucson area - the next at tomorrow's KFMA Day at the Pima County Fairgrounds - Bob and Tom do not. Former Tucsonan Brad of Bobby & Brad is flown into town about half a dozen times a year, said Mark Bentz, vice president and general manager at Journal Broadcast Group.

While shows such as Bob and Tom are not live, those that are still allow for that longtime pleasure of calling up your favorite DJ and making a request or offering comments. A recent visit to the John & Frank show found dozens of listeners responding immediately to the questions they put out on the air. Tim & Willy, Tim said, receive many calls from listeners in Tucson, and handle them with a one-day delay. If someone calls from Tucson "saying, 'Wish my brother a happy birthday, we may call the brother up that day and tell him it will be on the air the next day,'" Tim said.

The institution of the nighttime DJ, however, has all but been pushed into retirement. Many stations in Tucson record DJ voices for evening and overnight shifts, allowing modern technology to cut and paste voices with songs in a process generally referred to as voice-tracking. The few overnights that remain live, such as KLPX, KIIM, KMXZ and KRQQ, are no longer the norm.

It's (voice tracking) been around for years," said Lotus general manager Steve Groesbeck. "It's really become a lot more prevalent since the Telecom Act because it's cost-saving." Before the Telecommunications Act of 1996, no one entity could own more than 40 radio stations.

Important, though, is whether listeners care whether their DJs are live and local.

"I don't think most listeners know," said Adam Jacobson, radio editor at Radio and Records, a trade newspaper. "Most listeners, all they care about is that it's enjoyable to listen to and it's entertaining."

Bentz disagreed. "I think they care, and you can tell by their voting with the Arbitron rating. The shows that are more local and focused in nature tend to do better."

The latest Arbitron numbers, released Monday, find the local John & Frank morning show No. 1 among males ages 25 to 54. Bobby & Brad follow in the No. 2 spot, KLPX's Barry & Andy are No. 3, and Bob & Tom are tied with Johnjay & Rich for fourth place. Arbitron is an international media marketing research firm that tracks radio broadcasters, cable companies and advertisers.

Of the Big Four radio corporations - Clear Channel, Lotus, Journal and Citadel - none has current plans to add additional syndicated programming or expand use of voice-tracking in Tucson. But, as Crowe noted, "our business is probably as fluid as any business."

"It certainly would be less expensive" to syndicate more, said Groesbeck. "From our perspective it's a lot better to be live and local."

"Especially now, with the advent of satellite delivery, with the multiple choices on the Internet, radio needs to focus on what it does best, which is being local," Jacobson said.

Representatives of the big companies say changes are inevitable. Consolidation, some say, has given listeners what they want.

Radio listeners may have noticed that one classic rock station in Tucson sounds pretty much like the others, and that the same contemporary hits show up on different stations.

Originality on the radio dial may not be prevalent - some might say it's waning by the day - but it's all part of the changing corporate face of commercial radio.

In the past six years, the radio business has undergone ma-

joor changes, with corporations taking advantage of loosened ownership restrictions by snapping up radio stations across the country and consolidating into huge networks.

The Telecommunications Act of 1996 relaxed decades-old restrictions on radio station ownership, allowing companies to own or operate more stations in a market. Almost as soon as the act was passed, companies began a buying frenzy.

In Tucson, four corporations own 21 of the 34 radio stations. Clear Channel Communications leads the pack with eight, and Citadel follows with five. Arizona Lotus Corp. and Journal Broadcasting Group, with four apiece, round out the dominant players in Tucson's radio scene.

Corporate types say it had to happen.

"It (consolidation) was necessary," said Mike Madigan, Tucson and Yuma market manager for Clear Channel Radio, a division of Clear Channel Communications. "In 1990, you had more stations in the red than were operating in the black, where other media was faring better than radio."

With consolidation, radio stations were able to streamline back-room operations, including human resources and accounting, to become more profitable, he said.

But some people worry that too much power is being put in too few hands, and that radio listeners' needs are being put behind the needs of corporate profits.

"While there are some economies of scale being realized, the savings are not being plowed back into improving service for listeners," said Andrew Schwartzman, president and chief executive of the Media Access Project in Washington D.C. "It's being used to buy more stations and pay the banks."

"That's a major problem for democracy," he said. "We need to constantly replenish the gene pool of ideas. They (radio stations) don't contribute by rebroadcasting the same formats in different markets."

Dennis Wharton, senior vice president of the National Association of Broadcasters in Washington, D.C., denies the dial has become homogenous.

"In our view the people who claim there's no variety on the radio dial today simply aren't turning on the radio and listening to what's out there," he said.

Wharton noted that before 1996, about 400 Spanish-language radio stations were on the air in this country, compared with more than 600 today.

"We think consolidation in general has been good for broadcasters and has been good for listeners," Wharton said. "The claims made that consolidation has led to bland and boring radio ring false. We find that it's led to more diverse formats."

According to the Federal Communications Commission, there were about 5,100 radio station owners before the 1996 law took effect. That number is down 25 percent to about 3,800. Similarly, the average number of owners per market has declined 22 percent in the period while the number of stations continues to rise, meaning fewer owners are controlling more stations.

Tucson's ownership, in contrast to the national trend, has remained largely unchanged since 1996. Milwaukee, Wis.-based Journal and Lotus out of Los Angeles, owned stations in Tucson then. In 1998 Clear Channel purchased AMFM Inc., which owned four stations in Tucson and Las Vegas-based Citadel entered the Tucson market last year when it bought five stations from Jim Slone last year.

Station managers in Tucson maintain that their success depends on how responsive they are to the local markets.

"It really gets down to the local operator and how well they execute their business plan," Madigan said. He said though Clear Channel owns nearly 1,300 stations nationwide, business decisions are made locally.

Steve Groesbeck, general manager of Arizona Lotus, said making sure on-air content is relevant to the market is one way smaller companies can compete with the large conglomerates.

"Good programming will win out all the time, and good local programming will win out over programming from another market," he said.

But he said competing has become more challenging for smaller operators.

Large companies have the advantage of being able to reach a larger audience than smaller companies.

"If you're a stand-alone, it's very difficult to get that market penetration," Groesbeck said.

Mark Bentz, vice president and general manager of Journal Broadcast Group in Tucson, said the trend has made it harder for younger people to enter the market as corporations use syndication and voice tracking instead of DJs to flesh out broadcast schedules.

"We've kind of watered down our on-air talent, and there aren't as many (job) opportunities on the air," Bentz said of the industry in general.

Consolidation, though, has given listeners what they want, he said.

"It's mostly been good for the listener," Bentz said. "The formats that we're likely to emphasize are the formats that are the most popular."

And corporate financial and programming support is invaluable, said Citadel programming director Herb Crowe.

"There's a lot more help available," he said. "There's a lot more program directors doing the same format you're doing, a lot more ideas to draw from."

The four major broadcasters in Tucson have staked out their particular formats and demographic groups they are targeting. Lotus runs KFMA-FM 92.1, KLPX-FM 96.1 and KCMT-FM 101.9, all rock stations that target men. Journal targets female listeners with adult contemporary stations KMXZ-FM "Mix" 94.9, KZPT-FM "The Point" 104.1 and oldies station KGMG-FM "Mega" 106.3. Citadel's flagship station is country station KIIM-FM 99.5, long the dominant ratings leader in Tucson. The company also attracts country listeners with KOAZ-FM "Cat Country" 97.5.

Clear Channel takes a different approach, with stations competing in different formats across the dial, with country (KOYT-FM 92.9), oldies (KWFM-FM 97.1) and contemporary hits stations (KRQQ-FM 93.7 and KOHT-FM 98.3) in the FM band.

"We're kind of the balanced approach where they're more of the segmented approach," Clear Channel's Madigan said. "I'd rather have a broad basket representing what the Tucson population looks like."

Though there are only a handful of formats in the FM market here, the strategy is apparently successful. Twelve of the top 14 radio stations are FM stations in those formats, and all 14 are owned by those four broadcasting companies.

However, the FCC has started to re-examine ownership rules. In November, the commission opened proceedings to investigate whether the consolidation is serving the public interest.

But many feel the fever pitch of buying radio stations has cooled significantly because of the recent recession and may not resume unless the FCC makes it possible for companies to own an even greater percentage of stations in each market.

There potentially could be some modest consolidation a head," NAB's Wharton said. "There are still opportunities, even for individuals, to buy a station that can turn a nice revenue for them."

KEEPING UP WITH FORMAT CHANGES AT LOCAL STATIONS

In the past year, as dial competition heated up, station owners changed formats and frequencies. Here's a scorecard of the changes.

- 92.9 FM: Oldies station KWFM moved to 97.1 and was replaced by "Coyote Country" KOYT in April 2001.

- 97.1 FM: Contemporary Christian KGMS switched to adult standards KCEE in January 2001. Three months later was changed to oldies station KWFM.

- 97.5 FM: Tucson's only smooth jazz station, KOAZ "The Oasis," was taken off the air and replaced with "Cat Country."

- 100.3 FM: Modern rock station KEDJ went Latino in November 2001 and became Spanish soft adult contemporary KMRR "Amor."

- 101.9 FM: Classic rock station KCMT went on the air in April 2001 after a last-minute format change from country.

- 107.5 FM: Classic hits KHYT shifted format slightly and became classic rock "Rock 107-5" in December 2001.

- 940 AM: Standards station KCEE flip-flopped positions with 97.1 FM and became contemporary Christian KGMS in January 2001.

- 1290 AM: Classic country KCUB rode off into the sunset in August 2001 and became "Fox Sports Radio 1290."

QUOTES

"Everybody listens to one thing. I would like more diversity, more things local. I would rather hear somebody on a morning show talk about something local, something happening here."

Bryan Davis, administrative assistant, KFMA listener

"I watch the local news, so I listen to the local radio if I can. Because they give you the local happenings."

Chuck Diaz, wholesale produce salesman, KCMT listener

"I like it when they throw some national news every once in a while. Something more homegrown is actually preferable.

The station I listen to actually seems to fit that description. That station is very local, but they do plug in nationally every hour."

Bruce Hubner, student, KTUC listener

"I'm plugged into my community, but I care more about national issues, especially what's going on with our foreign policy."

David Spencer, TV photographer, NPR listener

"I used to listen to 98.3. The morning show that they had before represented the Tucson culture better than the show from Phoenix."

Kathy Farrish, student, KFMA listener

"I feel like there is really no content in what they're saying. They're all like Howard Stern, and I don't like him. I would rather hear news and music, what's going on in the world."

Crystal Lewis, student, National Public Radio and KXCI listener