

FMQB COVER STORY
Rob Morris
 OM KDWB/KTLK & PD KDWB,
 Minneapolis

By Fred Deane

Clear Channel Radio has always prided itself in the quality of programmers across its properties. It's a company that demands a lot from its people and expects its programmers to handle multiple tasks at multiple properties at a high level. One of its star pupils over the years has been Rob Morris. Throughout his fifteen years at KDWB, Morris has consistently kept the mainstream CHR ahead of the pack in many areas and is currently deftly guiding both KDWB and (News/Talk) KTLK-FM through these turbulent times.

Born and raised in Columbus, Ohio, there really was only one college path for Rob Morris, THE Ohio State University. Upon graduation, he started his career in Columbus at WSNY and WVKO and then shifted to Cleveland joining WJMO-FM. It was in 1994 that Morris would settle into a market and a station he would call his professional home for the next decade and a half, as then PD Mark Bolke hired Rob as APD/MD/mid-day jock.

What were the circumstances that led to you becoming PD at KDWB?

When I joined KDWB in 1994 we were owned by **Larry Benson** and Mid-Continent Media. Within a couple of years the Telecom Bill began to take hold of the industry and ownership changes were happening very quickly. We were sold to Chancellor Broadcasting and shortly thereafter our PD **Mark Bolke** announced he was going to join our consultant, **Bill Richards**. It was spring of 1995, and I became interim PD for a few months and then shortly after that **Dan Kieley** was hired as PD and he kept me on as APD/MD. Dan had a two year run and then in June of '97 went to KIIS in Los Angeles. Two months after another interim term, I was appointed full time PD.

What are the biggest changes in your job as a PD today versus a decade ago?

The onslaught of technology and everything that accompanies the new media landscape relative to all the digital components and methods we have of pushing out our content. The position has become more of a content manager than a Program Director, and has become much more multi-dimensional. It's not all about the on-air component. Figuring out what the consumers want is still the name of the game, but at the same time technology has changed the rules immensely with the various ways our product can be consumed. You're also being challenged more today than ever by the various ways consumers use competitive devices and digital outlets to get similar content to what we deliver.

What key tenets of your job, that you gained early on as a programmer, have endured throughout your programming career?

You have to make sure you have the right people doing the right jobs and that the entire staff is on the same page. To quote a phrase from the great **Woody Hayes**, "You Win With People." We have great teams on both stations I oversee in programming, sales and promotions, and we get great support from our Market Manager, **Mike Crusham**. You also need to ensure that your systems are in place and you have confidence they will work, whether it's setting up Selector or it's delivering the content to your customer in the right fashion. I'm a big believer in paying attention to details. I always come back to the old saying, details win ball games, and when you consistently pay attention to details you're going to be the smarter programmer and hopefully figure out what the competitor's weakness is.



Do you feel there's a mentoring system in place today for younger programmers to learn from more experienced ones?

In my position, Clear Channel has asked me on a few occasions to help other programmers in different markets who might need a little guidance. I'm certainly open to helping them whether it's by phone or email. I've always believed in asking a lot of questions. I learned a lot along the way by asking questions, and sometimes not only from programmers I worked for but from programmers I competed against. I could pick up what they did and why they did it, and occasionally there might be a call after we weren't competitors anymore and I would ask why they did something. Today, there are PD's who do reach out with questions and I'm happy to help. But as a system, I don't know that there's one in place. At Clear Channel we have some of that going on and I hope to see more of it around the corner.

What's the best advice you can give to a young PD?

Ask a lot of questions. Always be inquisitive and particularly ask why certain things are done. A lot of times I get a sense that they don't have a feel for the base knowledge. I'm not saying you have to do it the same way it was done 5-10-20 years ago, but there are some pretty consistent and reliable tenets as to how the game is played in terms of how we can effectively reach audiences and they've been in place over time.

Is there any area with younger programmers where they might have somewhat of a blind spot with the use of technology?

The trend in recent years has been to become a little too much accustomed to research. The less experienced programmers have a tendency to look at



Rob, Kelly Clarkson and Ross Grierson of SixtyFifty Music at a KDWB Star Party.

music research and callout and place too much emphasis on songs at the top. There might be slight differences on how to see and interpret that data. Certainly the research helps guide us with what our customers like or want, but sometimes there's an over reliance of playing those songs over and over. There are a lot of different factors that come into play and should be considered and I think that's where you can help them see things a little differently.

How has the new-budget era of the past year affected your properties the most?

Here's the problem. You have top line revenue that's not growing. You have expenses that have stayed flat or you've been trying to cut, but you could never cut enough during this bad recession so it becomes a vicious cycle of circumstances. Marketing and research dollars aren't there anymore, so there has to be different ways to still get some of that data and resourcefully market your brands. You're challenged in many ways, so the solution is to try and figure out different ways to do things.

We've done some things recently that turned out to be effective. In the fourth quarter we're going to bring back some marketing and promotion presence and dollars by doing some creative things with clients. We're doing a 'Pay Your Bills' campaign with KDWB for example. While the tactical money wasn't there from the corporate side we were able to partner with BP (gas stations) and Rainbow Foods. We're going to get point of purchase marketing inside those stores that instruct consumers to listen to KDWB to get their bills paid.

As we work in the new budget area, a lot of it is going to be about figuring out how you can partner better with some of your bigger advertising clients, score wins for them and also use it as an opportunity to market your brands and things you need to do tactically for the new form of ratings measurement.

Advertising revenue is down drastically at many clusters and stations across the country. How will your cluster fare this year?

Our ratings and revenue in the Minneapolis/St. Paul cluster are actually very

good. I believe we're one of the top performing markets in year-to-year revenue. I know my two stations are actually outperforming budgeted numbers and/or outperforming year-to-year numbers which is pretty amazing given today's economy. If the back of the year is good for us we may end up over last year's number which is incredible considering the country might be off 20% or more.

How does working for a large radio group like Clear Channel pay dividends for your stations in these tough economic times?

The size and scope of the company certainly helps because we have internal resources both digitally from CCDR (Clear Channel Digital Radio) as well as other programmers you can either lean on or be a part of the process in sharing productive information. Whether it relates to on-site, online, on-air or on the street, there's a sense of being a part of a larger group with the ability to play off their strengths and being able to cherry pick the best things.

How much emphasis is being placed today by CC on the programming side of helping to create revenue opportunities on digital platforms relative to the inherent focus of the sales staff?

Clear Channel is constantly looking at ways to increase our digital platform and to increase revenue streams from the digital platform. I don't want to toot our horn too much, but our cluster is up significantly where there have been struggles in other markets. It's been a productive experience for us as well as our clients.

There has been a lot of importance placed on programming to come up with fresh content to drive unique users to our websites. We are constantly looking for ways to spread our content virally whether it's through the social networking sites or fan sites.

Streaming has also become more and more important. The sales department has identified the digital platform as a viable area for revenue growth and the onus is also on programming to make sure we're delivering content and getting our content spread among the platforms, especially the unique content we generate through our personalities.

CC has introduced the Premium Choice (PC) initiative this year. Are any of your local properties participating in any of the PC programming options?

Our Oldies station, KOOL 108, is essentially one hundred percent PC except for mornings where we have a local morning talent. We did not take any PC on KDWB. While much of the PC content is very good from a music standpoint, the biggest issue of PC talent can be the ability to localize the show from the on-air talent's perspective. There are certain aspects of your station and market your audience knows. They know and relate to your high profile personalities like KDWB's **Dave Ryan** in the morning or **Lucas** our afternoon drive personality, or K102's Wake-Up Crew with **Donna Valentine**.

Obviously the local talent is very community driven with real presence. It's the one thing you can't really get with PC talent. That's not to say that outside of mornings in other dayparts, someone's not using the station for music where PC can be just as effective as the live and local approach. However, it is imperative that Program Directors of PC content inform the PC talent to cut spots for the local markets so that a community focus is maintained and community interests are addressed. We're also looking at ways of doing more point-to-point talent sharing where you can feed the information to that talent who can then deliver the local information.

There has been feedback from markets where direct format competitors have welcomed PC programming and have revved up their live and local approach. Is there an ongoing assessment strategy for PC content where it's been deployed?

Clear Channel certainly looks at PC as a viable option, but it is about choice. It's about the local markets deciding whether or not this will work. In some cases, there has been ratings growth. I know here with KOOL 108, which is predominantly PC, we have a weekly come of over 700,000 people 6+ which is significantly higher than what it was in diary. As we move through this process Clear Channel is analyzing it and looking at every PC situation and daypart to see if it's been successful or not. You have to assess it market by market, station by station. You're going to have some success, but there are some areas that will fall short. The goal is to correct the markets that fall short and make adjustments to gain ratings growth. I can't speak for competitors, but I think they would be naïve to think we're just going to sit there and not constantly evaluate the effectiveness of the programming and how we can improve it.

Is it prudent strategy to import talent into major markets when the talent has no prior branding in the market and the marketing power for the talent is prohibitive due to budget constraints?

Visibility in the market for any of your personalities is essential and if you don't have the marketing tools to tout the virtues of an imported show, syndicated show or even a live and local show, it can adversely affect the adaptor process. You need to get people to sample a new show to see if they like

it, because with a lot of listeners we find they have their reasons why they favor a morning show and typically it's because the morning show delivers what they really want and they like the personalities. So when you introduce a new show into the market it needs to have adopters and that comes behind marketing and promotion dollars.

However, you have to look at it on a case by case scenario. There are some markets where an imported talent has fallen short, but there are also success stories. When I was visiting in Miami a few years ago and heard **Elvis Duran** on Y100, I was amazed at how seamlessly they integrated him into the fabric of the station and it's been a very successful situation there. His numbers are very strong at Y100. I don't know if that can be replicated in every major market based on the nuances and competitive dynamics of each market. Every market is different and you just don't know how it's going to do. You can't operate in a vacuum expecting them all to be the same. You have to assess whether a market is going to adopt and respond positively to a specific show. What I believe is effective in Miami is that Y100 has someone at the station in mornings to bridge the gap. Plus, it's an east coast market that a lot of New Yorkers migrate to, so that dynamic may have played a significant role in his acceptance as well. The bottom line is that it's a very good show.

Ultimately it's about the content, but it's also about the marketplace and what else is in the market. How strong or weak the marketplace competition is will have a big say in whether imported talent can succeed, and the marketing and promotion behind it.

How do large radio groups avoid getting too centralized in their approach to local product decisions?

Clear Channel does ask for feedback and information from the local markets

so they can process it at a higher level of management. That line of communication needs to be strong and there needs to be a sense of trust between the local markets and the senior level of management that we're all delivering what we have to deliver, striving for the right things and working toward the same goals which are to grow ratings and revenue.

Your PPM pre-currency period was April/May 2009 with PPM currency starting in June. As you overlapped with diary these past few months, what was the correlation between PPM and diary results?

This market has been pretty comparable to what we saw in diary. Mass appeal stations have generally done well whether it's CHR, HOT AC, Rock or Country. It seems like the more mass appeal you are the better off you're going to perform in People Meter. One of the top end questions we were wondering about was to see if high performing diary stations with huge shares, like KQRS in this market with **Tom Barnard** in the mornings, were going to perform at the same level in the PPM world, and for the most part they have. There have been some stations that have jumped up significantly mainly because of cume, as is the case with most of the music stations. Some of the News/Talk stations have stayed about the same in terms of rank and share and haven't gained as much as the music stations in cume. The trends are similar to what we're seeing in a lot of other markets.

Are there any aspects of PPM measurement that fall short of expectations?

The consistency of the sample has been a little discouraging. Regarding KDWB, we started out in April pre-currency with huge numbers. We had a 7.8 (6+ share) and a cume of 867,100, which was significantly higher than our 5.5 diary share and cume of about 510,000. Since then the overall (6+) big picture number has ebbed down to the mid-six range and the only thing I can track it to is the sample size.

In April, Arbitron started out with an in-tab of almost 1,250 6+ panelists and now it's down to 1,050, well below the target of 1,136. They lost about 200 people. I know there's criticism coming out every day about the sample shortfall, but as an industry we need to really stay on Arbitron over this. I've mentioned it to some folks in our senior level management that the radio groups and agencies should be up in arms about this. If you tell me I'm going to get 1,136 people for 6+ in this market, and you're going to hit certain indexes, then don't over-deliver the upper end demos and under-deliver the younger end. You need to hit every cell you say you're going to hit or at least get as close as you can to 100%. But when you're delivering an index of 135 on the upper end (45+) and then everyone below the age 44 is indexing in the 70's and 80's, I don't think that's very viable.

The process is still relatively new and sample size is directly related to cost structure. Do you feel this will be an ongoing work-in-progress?

Yes I do and I know we have to adjust our expectation levels a little bit. But if you promise one thing and deliver something else, that's not a good way to do business. Our EVP of Programming **Gene Romano** warned us about this. He told us not to get overly excited about our pre-currency numbers because they would inevitably soften. Now that I've seen more markets roll out, I'm seeing it in other cases as well.

I trace it back to a couple of things. Arbitron goes into a new market, over-samples and puts a huge number into the market and then they start scaling it back because it's costly to keep incentives going and maybe people get bored with it so they're letting attrition set in. The problem is when you start out with a big number then lose a couple of P1's, you're screwed. We've seen it here and in other markets where they start out with a hot demo number and they're way over-indexing. Take our market, where they started with 1,250 when they were only supposed to do 1,136. So they were over-indexing at 115 and we were commending them saying that's a great job, and then the next month they lost 100 people...boom in one month, gone! We were wondering what the heck happened. And when you start losing them in the younger demos where they've had problems getting them and keeping them anyway...it's like, what's going on here guys? Is it a cost thing? Can we stop the bleeding?

How has the PPM world changed your programming philosophy and tendencies?

It started two years ago when Clear Channel was doing PPM boot-camps and going into markets informing local managers about what to expect. We were told then to expect to see a major difference based on how we're being rated and how we're being consumed. So we've had to take a look from top to bottom at everything we do from our air talent approach to all aspects of how we program the music. It's all about an environment of trying to create a different type of attitude and philosophy.

The biggest thing that's changed is that in the diary world it was all about getting listeners to remember. So you would do those tactics, beat them over the head with the

call letters and name of the station 80 million times a day, tout about how great you are and tell everybody from the rooftops what you do. With People Meter you don't do as much of those tactics, but you still want them to remember your brand. You just don't have to beat them over the head with your call letters over and over again. You have to figure out different ways of getting them to come back more frequently to your station, because it's all about creating listening habits. In the diary world it was all about getting them to report you, with PPM it's about getting them to come back as frequently as possible and listen. That's where you get your win and your lift in TSL, but more importantly you're going to get a big lift in cume. The goal is to keep your content relevant, viable and fresh, and something your listeners are really going to care about.

Do you feel enough marketing synergy exists today between the music and radio industries to the extent that each industry works to improve each other's product?

Generally speaking I believe the promotion reps, who are interested in their agenda of getting their music exposed to as many people as possible know that radio delivers a great deal of awareness based on the massive amount of cume radio delivers. Certainly there are other ways to accomplish this to a lesser degree, but for people to hear music at the mass levels that radio delivers there's truly no other comparison, especially with respect to new artists. I do feel there's a symbiotic relationship at the label promotion level and they appreciate our needs and what we can deliver, but I hope the artists and their managers don't forget where they started once they become superstars. I remember watching **Christina Aguilera** years ago at some little showcase when nobody knew her name and she was on the morning show the next day and I said to her, 'when you go on to be a huge star don't forget about radio.' A lot of times they kind of forget about the role radio played in getting them to the top. It certainly helps our brands and we appreciate it when new artists go on to be huge stars. It helps us with great content and it helps them be exposed to a wide audience.

Is there any area where you specifically feel there's a disconnection between the two industries?

This whole Performance Tax issue has caused everyone to sit there and look at each other in a kind of skeptical way regarding what the true agendas really are. This has caused everyone to kind of start looking at each other on both sides. Radio feels like we're getting dinged again because we're already paying a lot of royalty fees to publishers and songwriters. Is this new tactic an artist-record company type money grab?

I guess there are some people at labels that don't think we're very valuable in delivering a wide audience and exposing a bunch of new artists. It appears that some label execs have adopted the attitude toward radio of, 'you guys should pay us for all that money you take in because we're not getting our fair share.' It's caused somewhat of a schism, maybe not so much on the promotion side, I think they're torn on this issue, but certainly at the upper levels of management where label executives may not see the benefit in radio as much as they used to, which to me is not very smart. I just believe there has to be a deeper thought process and more consistency in their approach to this issue. **QB**