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From Radio To Interactive

Usability is key for Cox Radio websites

Cox Radio's station websites aren't necessarily the prettiest sites out there. All designed from the same template, they're graphics-light and text-heavy, with no splash pages and no Flash. What they do have is content — lots and lots of easily accessible, frequently updated content. This week R&R speaks with Cox Radio VP/Interactive & New Technologies Gregg Lindahl about his company's approach to interactivity.

R&R: *Can you talk about your background in radio?*

GL: I started in high school on my hometown radio station, KDIO/Ortonville, MN, and I was on the air in Minneapolis-St. Paul when I was in college — on my way to becoming a lawyer, as I recall. I was working for Storz Broadcasting, and they asked me to transfer to Oklahoma City to program their station there, KOMA.

I went on from there to program WSM-AM & FM in Nashville and then joined Cox as VP/GM of stations for them in two different markets, Charlotte and Dallas. I went on to manage stations in Portland, OR and Chicago. I came back to Cox eight years ago as President of its consumer market-research company.

R&R: *How did you end up working on the interactive side?*

GL: I got lucky. The majority owner of Cox Radio is Cox Enterprises. They're a very progressive company, and they were an early entrant into the online world. The *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, one of the newspapers the company owns, was, I think, the first newspaper online. Cox launched and owned AutoTrader.com and, about eight or nine years ago, was making multiple dot-com investments in companies like iVillage and Realtor.com.

So I was lucky to be working for the right company and was fortunate to be asked — after a lot of other people turned it down, I think — to become President and COO of a new joint venture they were doing with MP3.com. That was at the height of the dot-com frenzy. We got a tremendous education, and when we sold MP3Radio.com back to MP3.com, we morphed our unit here into what's now Cox Radio Interactive.

R&R: *What's Cox Radio Interactive all about?*

GL: We're a division within Cox Radio tasked with, among other things, thinking about and then building businesses around our new distribution-channel opportunities. We first exploited that on the Internet and have built a nice business around our station websites, and we are looking at all of the other opportunities that we have and at taking the publishing platform that we've built here and making that extensible to other media distribution.

It's a great group of people. We're not a very large bunch, but we have a lot of terrific people who do good work.

R&R: *I noticed that the websites all have the same template. Are they all run from the interactive division?*

GL: We're like the clearinghouse for tools and technology for the stations and the media. We approach doing things on the web in a very proportional kind of way, and one of the ways we wanted to take advantage of that proportional response is by putting everything on a common platform. So there is scalability in that.

> **"Most people think of their websites as a brand extension, and that's 50% accurate. They're really brand distribution."**

But it was based on what our listeners told us they wanted from a radio-station website, followed by pretty extensive usability testing. We tried to make our sites very interactive and very usable. Good formatics in one market are good formatics in another market, so you'll see some common design elements across our sites because there are best practices for usability that we try to employ everywhere.

So the sites all reside on a common publishing platform, but each station uses a publishing tool that we developed to publish its own content on the site and to update the site multiple times a day in many cases.

R&R: *How can a bad website hurt a radio station?*

GL: The most common mistake that people in our business tend to make about the website is how they think about it, and how you think about it drives, ultimately, what it ends up looking like and what kind of content features are on the site. Most people think of their websites as a brand extension, and that's 50% accurate. They're really brand distribution.

It's the difference between Coke and Diet Coke. Diet Coke is a brand extension, but Coke in a bottle and Coke in a can and Coke from a fountain, those are different ways to distribute Coke. The real asset that you have with a radio station is the local brand, and one distribution channel is your over-the-air stick. Another distribution channel is the website.

If you make that shift from the website as brand extension to the website as brand distribution, you realize that there has to be certain packaging, or a way to make the way people consume that particular distribution channel work.

If you start to think about it that way, you avoid some of the common mistakes that people make on websites. Mistake one would be splash pages, which are anathema, but you see them on so many radio-station websites.

And stations, when they're thinking about sites as brand extensions, sometimes think, "Oh, that just means we need to represent the brand in a big way," so you get large logos and lots of graphics. But when you think about using the web as a brand-distribution opportunity, you know that how people consume the web is link-based, and it's interactive.

That's the long answer to your question, but by changing the way people think about websites, you can change the way they "program" their websites in content and in look and feel.

R&R: *What's next for Cox Radio Interactive?*

GL: There are lots of plans. We're busy working on them right now. I'd like to tell you all about them, but we're competitive and don't really broadcast our intent.

The IT platform will someday be as important as the RF platform, and there are all these social networking, discovery opportunities, so there's a lot of revenue growth still out there for local-media websites, which is the category of media that we are in, talking about our brands on the web. We want to achieve significant reach, which we already are, we want to grow that reach, and we want to increase the revenues to our websites. That's our primary focus.

R&R: *Do all of your stations stream?*

GL: Yes. They've been doing that since 1998.

R&R: *They didn't stop during the 2001 flap over AFTRA royalties, when so many other broadcasters stopped streaming?*

GL: We actually built the streaming tools with the ability to do audio insertion or ad replacement. We did stop streaming for a couple of weeks because most of our stations hadn't implemented that tool. We stopped at the advertisers' request until the tool could be brought online everywhere.

R&R: *Are you working on podcasting?*

GL: Yes, absolutely, and we already have a feature on our sites that is downloadable. It's something called "featured advertiser listings," which we do for advertisers who pay an additional fee.

They get a featured listing on the site, their ad is available for instant replay and for download if they want that, we have direct links to their website or a special-offer page, and we append the audio with text so anything in the audio can be searchable and you can get a result returned on the website. That's downloadable right now.

In general, though, what we've seen is that we've got a long way to go with podcasting before it's critical mass. It may be five to seven more years. The streaming activity on our sites and in general is far outstripping the downloading activity.

R&R: *And there are music-licensing issues too.*

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GL: Absolutely. We're not going to podcast entire shows. It's just the content that we own that we'll podcast. I like podcasting for the ability to reach microtargets, I like podcasting for its ability to create a lot of unique content, but I'm not so sure it's a business.

I was talking to Mark Cuban about this, and with all the hysteria about podcasting, the question I had for Mark was, "Was it like this at the beginning of streaming too?" He said, "Yes, it was."

The same thing applies, in that it's a hobbyist practice. Back when streaming started — and I'm paraphrasing Mark — people said, "Everybody can have their own radio station." A lot of people did, but when everybody's doing it, Mark's point was, who is there to listen to it?

Podcasting is more a utility. It's another way for people to consume content. That's what I like about it. It's a convenience feature — like "Print this page" or "E-mail this page to a friend" or "Download this content." There are revenue opportunities around it, but I don't believe that it's the thing.

R&R: *I've seen it referred to as sort of a bridge technology before true wireless broadband.*

GL: Yes, exactly. It's on-demand consumption. And there's a big gap between the number of downloads reported for a podcast and the number of actual listens to those podcasts. I subscribe to six or seven a week, and I probably listen to one.

We've got a tool and we're ready to do it, we just haven't turned it on across the network. We've got some select experiments going with it.