

BRAD WOODWARD

MARKET DOMINATOR

When KIRO Talks, Seattle Listens

Occupying a prominent place on the short list of News/Talk stations that consistently lead their markets is KIRO/Seattle. In 1974 Bonneville International took what was then a mid-rated Adult/Contemporary station to News/Talk and built market-leading double digits before the end of the decade. KIRO has continued to dominate Seattle radio listening ever since.

But even institutions aren't immune to the perils of a competitive marketplace. After back-to-back 11.0 books in 1982, KIRO slowly began to hemorrhage, bottoming out last spring at 7.8 — an enviable rating still good enough for a first-place finish, but a "rude awakening" by KIRO standards, according to VP/News & Programming Vic Bremer.

Once awakened, KIRO made a spectacular rebound. Last fall it turned in a 10.7 performance that can't be entirely explained away by Seattle Seahawks football. "Certainly the Seahawks helped," says Bremer. "They had a heck of a good year. But after that 7.8 book we looked really hard at what could cause people to tune away, analyzing anything that might be an irritant.

"We made some adjustments. For instance, we've tried to make our business and financial news more broadbased. Our sports programming is much less scoreboard and more feature and human interest than it used to be. We're working hard to make sure the quality of audio in actualities and elsewhere is really top-notch. I think that helped, but I really don't have all the answers."

Capitalizing On Exclusive Franchises

At no loss for answers about how KIRO has evolved into such a powerhouse is Bremer's boss, VP/GM Joe Abel. "I think what makes us unique is exclusive franchises," Abel observes. "We are

the only radio station in America that currently owns the rights and has flagship status for the three major American pro sports — NFL football with the Seahawks, NBA basketball with the SuperSonics, and now major league baseball with the Mariners. When you own the rights, you have all the control, put together networks, and sell it." CBS affiliation gives KIRO access to events such as the World Series and Super Bowl.

Abel is convinced that getting a grip on the market was also made easier by KIRO's six-year headstart. "It really pays to be first with the format. We've had three stations try to take us on — KVI and KAYO in 1980; both changed their minds and went to other formats. And, of course, in October 1982 KING took us on, but they've never done better than a 2.0 share." The station's prime opponent is seen as KOMO, a full-service Adult/Contemporary station.

Noting the fierce head-to-head News/Talk battles in markets like New York, Abel admits, "We haven't had that kind of competition, to be honest with you. We paid the money to scare it off."

Nearing Top Ten In Billings

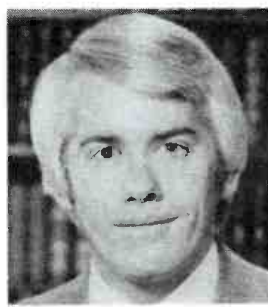
KIRO's heavy investment has been more than offset by a big payoff in revenues. As Abel puts it, "It's a highly commercial outfit. Even the plants in the lobby are for sale! We are capitalists." Sales will approach \$16 million in



BLOCKBUSTER REMOTES — KIRO has brought the world to Seattle through international remotes from such locales as China, Russia, Africa, and the Middle East. Nevertheless, says Vic Bremer, "The bread and butter is still how well we cover what's going on in Seattle, Bellevue, Everett, and Tacoma."



Vic Bremer



Joe Abel

1985, and Jim Duncan says that will make KIRO one of the top ten billers in the country, a remarkable feat for a station in the 15th largest market.

Abel is also awed by the sheer magnitude of the station's 650,000 weekly cume. "Three out of every eight people in this market shop at our store at least once a week. That's incredible. That would be a five or six-million cume in New York or Los Angeles."

Abel emphasizes that KIRO's success is by no means accidental. "We are really into training and planning. We have an expression around here: 'Good results without good planning are simply good luck.' Training includes a nine-month sales school for entry-level account executives before they hit the streets.

News Comes First

Despite its sports emphasis, talk programming, and even a smattering of music in middays, KIRO's forte is news. "I think we've hung our hat on that claim in the marketplace," says Bremer. "People do turn to us on days of crisis." Abel echoes that assessment: "We're newradio. Especially in drivetime we don't fool with it."

Abel calls KIRO news "user friendly," while Bremer stresses, "We are not a sterile, staccato operation. You'll find more warmth and personality on the air than you might at a lot of news operations. The selection of stories is local, and we make them pertinent to people's lives. We try not to talk in bureaucratized or legalese or any other private languages. We've had a consistency in the on-air players, which I think has helped."

Midday Music Relief

There are eight hours of solid news blocks each weekday during drivetimes, plus an hour at noon. Middays consist of short interviews (no calls accepted) averaging ten minutes in length, in addition to news, features, and up to four "safe" A/C songs an hour.

"We've found the music seems to give a bit of relief to the heavy topics in the interviews," Bremer explains. "It has served us pretty well in that midday period. We always have very respectable numbers in middays, a time when many other information stations have problems."

KIRO shifts into two-way sports talk with Wayne Cody at 7pm, followed by NBC Talknet from 9pm-5:30am. With a few exceptions, such as two-way talk devoted to psychological advice and outdoor activities, weekends are similar to weekdays. Like many stations, KIRO has found its Saturday and Sunday morning news blocks to be surprisingly strong. Bremer notes, "Those blocks are dominant in their periods here and show there is a real need for news on the weekend."

Sports Pros Outweigh Cons

Bremer says he understands the concern of broadcasters who fear that play-by-play sports may alienate core listeners, but at KIRO "the benefits outweigh the liabilities" through both revenues and exposure of the station to new listeners.

"Football in this area is really important, and to have the Seahawks on our station on Sunday just brings in tons of people who maybe wouldn't sample us otherwise. So we try to do a good job of promoting other programming

elements within our play-by-play."

Another big plus for KIRO in the promotion area is nepotism within the Bonneville family. Bremer explains, "We have the advantages of a sister FM (KSEA), VHF TV station (KIRO-TV), and a corporate attitude that we're all going to help each other." That help extends to advertising, program tie-ins, and cross-mentions. KIRO also makes extensive use of billboards.

Ongoing Success Demands Change

Asked why the Seattle market seems to take so well to News/Talk, Bremer points out that Northwesterners historically are "independent thinkers" who lead a "more cerebral way of life" than many other Americans. Added to that is Seattle's growing importance as a center of finance and international trade.

While he loves to hear people say KIRO has tapped into this mix to become a giant, Bremer is wary of being lulled into complacency. "This is an extremely competitive market and we're always scrapping. It would be a mistake for us to sit back. We do a lot of market research, and we also test prototype programming and promotions. It's important for us to always be looking to change because this is a dynamic, growing area. KIRO is a great radio station and I think we're responsive to changes in the marketplace. We'll continue to exercise leadership."



ELECTRONIC NEWSROOM — In 1982 KIRO installed the nation's third computerized radio newsroom.



AIRBORNE — In addition to fielding a traffic/news helicopter, KIRO calls itself the only radio station in the country with its own jet. Actually, the jet is shared with and principally used by sister station KIRO-TV.