

Insider Interviews

Ivan Braiker - The Mike Kinosian Interview --presented by ASCAP

Mobile Marketing Is Ivan's Braiking News

Three of the most magical yet increasingly indispensable letters within a radio station's walls are coming under even heightened scrutiny particularly in this fragile and volatile economic environment.

Every broadcaster imaginable yearns to maximize Non-Traditional Revenue.

As CEO/Founding Partner of a Seattle-based 60-employee entity, stellar leading-edge executive Ivan Braiker packs a potent NTR solution in his hip pocket. "A venture capital friend told me about a meeting he had with some guys from Australia," Braiker recalls. "They had something to do with cell phones and radio [but] my friend didn't [fully] understand it. He asked me to talk with them and ferret out the [details]."

Contact information was for Graham Knowles who'd spent 25 years in radio sales.

Thirty minutes was allocated for a Starbucks confab and as Braiker points out, "We left eight hours later. I was blown away and knew it was an absolute game-changer for radio. I could see how a Program Director could light up with this. Sales Managers would get it and promotion people would embrace it."

Tribe Has Spoken

Mobile marketing is the basis of the company that came to fruition (Knowles is its Director/Business Development) and Braiker maintains radio could flourish with it more so than any other industry.

Youngsters in the U.K. call a cell phone "hip cricket" because it sits on their hips and chirps, thus the business name HipCricket of which Braiker declares, "It can become interactive without doing anything that requires programming support or assistance. [Although it wasn't called that], radio was the first social network. You and your friends

would listen to the same station. It was essentially its own tribe. In a world where very little separates one station from another, the ability to know who your fans are is of ultimate importance.”

Listeners in a mobile marketing scenario are able to engage in situations they enjoy as well as offer input to their favorite station.

Furthermore call-to-action can be tracked. “One of radio’s biggest hurdles is the average radio salesperson really doesn’t believe [this medium] works,” Braiker contends. “They’re afraid to be tested on it.”

Unrealistic expectations could be a culprit. “[Management] thinks [a promotion is a failure] if the station doesn’t fill a stadium,” opines Braiker who recently worked with a laser eye clinic as a client. “You could text-in to win laser eye surgery. The rebound message was an invitation to attend a free seminar about laser eye surgery.”

Approximately 200 people showed up as a result of the three-week campaign. “If I told that to the salesperson, [he or she] probably wouldn’t have pitched it [but] the client said it was the most effective ROI it ever had on any advertising,” Braiker states. “Not all advertisers expect a homerun every time. Get a base hit and you’ll have a happy [client].”

As the platform for Macy’s and Dr. Pepper, HipCricket has a major brand world presence, giving Braiker a completely fresh perspective on what transpires on that side of the fence; Nestle and Arby’s are also notable clients. “We’re very blessed to be in a hot space,” he acknowledges. “We average six different brand leads a day [and have] built a very good reputation in the brand and agency world as a ‘go-to’ company. [Our] clients don’t want to even put their toe on the line. They want to be safe. We guide them to make sure they stay that way.”

Political Parallel

During his maturation process Las Vegas native Braiker listened to radio but didn’t consider it as a career.

An International Relations and Foreign Service major at Washington, DC's American University Braiker worked throughout his college years for Nevada Democratic Senator Howard Cannon. "As I got involved with political campaigns, I quickly [realized] that when you're operating a radio station you're [basically] campaigning for votes. That's what ratings are all about."

Immediately after his college graduation, Braiker returned to Las Vegas as a television station AE. "The father of a friend of mine owned [and then sold KLUC/Las Vegas]. Right after the sale, my friend said he and I should buy a radio station. I was 22 and we bought [KBMI-AM/Las Vegas]. That was my first venture into radio and I absolutely fell in love with it. We completely rebuilt [KBMI] and eventually added an FM. I stayed up nights and got a great engineering education."

Persuaded by George and Judy Burns to run Burns Media Consultants, Braiker later worked for Burns Media clients Peter Starr and Dick Oppenheimer who had a Memphis property which needed to be turned around. "Part of the problem was a bunch of white guys were trying to [operate a station targeted to a black audience]," Braiker remarks. "I did exactly what they wanted which was to make it profitable and helped them sell it in less than a year."

Beware Of Falling Satellites

In the mid-1970s, Belo Broadcasting tapped 26-year-old Braiker to get Dallas' "Zoo" (KZEW) up-and-running and he subsequently headed the company's Radio Division. "It lost money for 15 straight years [but] the first year I was involved, we made a substantial amount," Braiker boasts. "We were the hippie rock and roll station the company didn't want to even admit it owned."

While at Belo, Braiker had multiple conversations about what could be done to save AM radio. One thing led to another and as Satellite Music Network's eventual President/Co-Founder points out, "There was the ability to do sideband broadcasting from satellite uplinks. It was creating something like mobile marketing. We laugh at it now but I can

tell you one of my biggest [challenges at SMN] was convincing broadcasters that satellites wouldn't fall from the sky."

By way of perspective CNN was in its nascent stages, HBO was moving from local feeds to satellite and a satellite dish carried a \$25,000 price tag. "It was a relatively expensive proposition that we had to help broadcasters implement," Braiker underscores.

Analogous to his current HipCricket regimen Braiker traveled to numerous markets and state conventions. "We learn from the past and hopefully some things go in circles," he reasons. "Radio is too powerful not to be successful. I probably understand better than most the various dimensions of what's going on around us today with the interactive world. Radio can and should still lead the way on many things. It's a great business that has allowed itself to be strangled. Some stations not owned by group consolidators [though] are doing just fine."

He Built This City

Despite the fact the name (Olympic Broadcasting) of the 13-station chain Braiker formulated when he left SMN wasn't in any way sports-related, he was forced to re-dub it. "When we went public, the United States Olympic Committee made us change our name," explains Braiker who switched the chain's moniker to Olympia Broadcasting. "It was named after the Olympic Mountains, which I could see from my office. Congress gave ownership of the word 'Olympic' to the USOC."

Innovative products were created at Olympia and Braiker unmistakably relished that slice of his career which included his "Rock 40" involvement. "The format first launched on our Kansas City station," he proclaims. "We owned 'The City' in San Francisco [KKCY], which was an unbelievably creative and innovative station that has never been duplicated. I didn't want to sell it but was offered almost triple our money in two years."

Buyer Jim Gabbert sought to jettison the format, prompting Huey Lewis, Marty Balin and other Bay Area residents to create a "Save 'The City'" coalition which Braiker admits he was silently rooting on. "If I ever had a love child in the radio business - that

was it," concedes Braiker who can include overseeing an industry trade publication as another nifty claim-to-fame. "If I could do it over, I'd be [KKCY's] sole owner. I would've kept that one station and be in the same situation as [WBEB/Philadelphia owner] Jerry Lee."

From there Braiker bought a true "Mom & Pop" Albuquerque facility where his wife did sales but as he admits, "My heart was taking me back to Seattle. It was when Michael O'Shea was selling his interest in [KUBE/Seattle] to Ackerley."

Collaboration of longtime friends O'Shea and Braiker produced 43-station New Northwest Broadcasters although as Braiker confides, "It became pretty intense with one venture partner who was just awfully difficult to deal with. Our group had two substantial, fully-priced offers from broadcasters Michael and I would've liked to be part of [but] they were turned down. More was wanted but I didn't know how to do that so I said 'have at it' and left [as did] Michael [who] began [Los Angeles-based All Comedy Radio]."

Partners Prove To Be Good Sports

Dyed-in-the-wool radio fan Braiker is clearly disappointed in the medium's thus far slow-to-respond attitude to HipCricket's mobile marketing concept. "Had I not come from radio, I probably would have said it's a dead-end and we should focus someplace else," he candidly comments. "I continue to do what we do with radio because I love [the industry] and believe it is starting to come around. In the best of all worlds, I break even with radio and have honestly throttled back with [it]. Some radio folks may be so shell-shocked right now they may not 'get' anything. I'm fully empathetic in what they're up against. The bottom line [however] is [mobile marketing] is a very powerful medium that is not being used to its fullest extent."

Sports outlets employing it have been especially gratified by the results. "Traffic that comes from those stations is second to none," emphasizes Braiker. "They have the drug and are now being given a new way to mainline it. You'd be surprised how fast a 60-year-old listener learns how to send a text message."

Texting's fastest-growing cell is said to be 45-54. "Even if your `child' is 25 years old, you're texting because that's the only way they want to communicate with mom and dad," Braiker points out. "In the first year we fully operated the company [2004], slightly more than one billion text messages were sent [compared to the present] 1.9 billion a day. Jim Rome has his own HipCricket system [for the Premiere Radio talent's daily sports program], as does [Urban Contemporary morning personality] Tom Joyner."

Among Braiker's favorite radio clients is Clear Channel-owned heritage Los Angeles CHR "Kiss-FM" (KIIS). "Management there would say we aren't a vendor – we're their partner," he stresses. "[KIIS Marketing Director] Eileen Woodbury wondered why the station wouldn't want to communicate with its listeners the way they communicate with each other. There's no better way to say it. My Account Manager who works with Clear Channel/Los Angeles knows what their stations' promotions will be for the next six months. We work closely with them in integrating mobile in all their promotions - we couldn't ask for anything more."

Granted his SMN "satellite radio" connection differs significantly from Sirius XM's subscription model; nonetheless Braiker is a valuable resource in evaluating that industry faction and believes it has an uphill fight, although he hastens to assign credit where it is due. "[Sirius XM CEO] Mel [Karmazin] has been a friend for a long time and I have a world of respect for him. If anyone can figure it out, it will be him. Some satellite channels are extremely well done. There's a lot of variety and interesting things. You don't have to love satellite radio [but] you can love its content. Everything involving entertainment and how you want to spend your time revolves around content."

In contrast however Braiker adamantly declares, "HD Radio is a huge failure. No one has put compelling content on it. There isn't a monthly fee but you have to pay several hundred dollars for a good HD radio. People won't spend money to listen to re-purposed crap. How many radios would have been sold if Howard Stern were put on one of those channels?"

Power of Three

Fourteen hours constitutes a short workday for Braiker who sometimes finds it daunting to get everything done, especially with the domestic and international time zones he covers. "I love what I do and don't want to [imply] I'm chained to a desk," he persuasively states. "You get to look inside the tent and see the process that goes into determining what [a brand's] marketing and advertising will look like. That's pretty fun for a radio guy."

Kinship that Braiker possesses for the March of Dimes dates back to his Las Vegas days. "I have a love for little ones anyway," he points out. "I got even more involved when my son was born with some complications and was in a neonatal care unit. He's perfect now."

Personal radio preferences for Braiker these days include all-News and Smooth Jazz outlets although there are moments when Triple A stations get sampled. "Unfortunately, I haven't been exposed to one that's consistent," he regrets. "I'll hear something on a 'Sunday Brunch' segment that's really terrific. Once [radio is] in your blood, it's in your blood. Part of me wants to buy a radio station so I can show everyone how to do it. In my mind, I'd operate [it] with three breaks an hour but I'd be getting three times the normal cost for [each commercial]."

Pre-produced agency spots wouldn't be accepted though. "My on-air talent would do one live commercial read every break," Braiker fantasizes. "Advertisers would know we were making a difference. If \$10 million suddenly appeared in my bank account and I could do whatever my heart desired with it, I'd find a station and go 'play radio' again. I'd also like to work with young, sharp entrepreneurs and help them build companies. That would be a fun way to give back. I'd do it for the simple fun of it and not for the money."