

The Art And Science Of

Voice-tracking isn't going away: Experts offer advice on how to best use the technology without sacrificing localism **By Mike Stern**

One of radio's most controversial developments

in the last decade is undoubtedly the advent of voice-tracking. Regardless of whether you are a proponent or opponent of the practice, there is no doubt it is here to stay. ■

With programmers and air talent in markets of all sizes now wearing enough hats to fill a boutique, voice-tracking has become an essential job skill in today's radio environment. Meet Michelle Matthews, OM for Clear Channel's Omaha cluster, whose duties include oversight of two country stations—heritage KXKT (Kat 103) and new country KTWI (Twister 93-3)—classic hits KGOR (Superhits 99.9), news/talk KFAB (News Radio 1110) and '80s-based rocker KKBW (96-1 the Brew), where she is also morning co-host. As you might imagine, the days of live staffs around the clock at each of those properties are long gone.

'You have to fit into the environment and be an actor. It's a matter of figuring out how I can be this person the programmer wants and still do the show I want to do.'

—Randi West

Matthews rides herd over stations filled with a dizzying combination of live local talent, recorded local talent, content from talent in other markets and syndicated shows. In a classic understatement, she offers humbly, "It's an extra challenge trying to balance the best of all worlds."

Combining Matthews' experiences with those of others who have mastered the art of voice-tracking provides, if not a road map, at least a solid guidebook for how to maximize every show on a station—live or not.

Stay Involved

Among the ways that Matthews employs voice-tracking involves talent from other markets. For instance, Twister imports Amy James from Clear Channel country KEEY (K102)/Minneapolis. "She does a really good job of personalizing the breaks and is phenomenal at communicating the spirit of the radio station and of local events," Matthews says. To help, the station keeps James informed on everything it does.

That effort receives kudos from Clear Channel CHR/top 40 WDCG (G105)/Raleigh PD/afternoon host Randi West, who tracks several other stations in addition to her work there. In fact, early on, West was considered a pioneer of the practice, exporting to no fewer than 18 stations for Clear Channel. "It comes down to communication. It's about being involved," she says, suggesting that sta-

tions should "treat your outside voice-trackers like they are in your building. Put me on your e-mail distribution list. Even if it's a memo about passes for the parking lot or food in the kitchen, send it to me. The reality is, there are a lot of ways to incorporate small things that are internal to the station into your show content."

Jacobs Media consultant Keith Cunningham agrees that at least some of the burden belongs on the station. "It's up to the home-market staff to get as much information as possible to that jock. E-mail, mail or fax all the station information you have." Even more important, he continues, "have a conversation at least once a week, though three times would be even better, just to

say, 'Here's what's going on in the market this week.' Jocks should have an open line to the PD or someone on staff that they can ask questions." While stations need to communicate as much information as possible to an out-of-market talent, there are numerous resources available to jocks who need to learn about a new city. Maria Lopez, night host on Clear Channel smooth jazz KKSF/San Francisco and the company's Smooth Jazz Network, used to run her own home-based smooth jazz voice-tracking operation. She says, "Chambers of Commerce are a good source of what is going on in the market."

West agrees: "We pretended like we were moving to each city and joined the Chamber



VOICE-TRACKING

of Commerce. They send you a welcome kit with everything you want to know about the city." She also suggests everything from studying TV station Web sites to radio message boards to learn. Another secret weapon: "Go there. I would buy an airline ticket and fly to the market. I didn't tell anybody, I didn't tell the PD. I'd just go. It was like a little mini-vacation and when I came back, people would say, 'Wow, you really know the market.'"

Lopez mentions another unlikely info source. "Salespeople would call me," which helped her understand the station's financial priorities. That communication led to opportunities to travel to the markets to make appearances as well as en-

dorsement deals.

For a format like smooth jazz, Lopez was also able to become part of the music community. "I would find out who's appearing in town." It reached the point where she would get e-mails from musicians telling her about gigs in the cities in which she was heard.

Staying Motivated

One of the biggest challenges Matthews faces with locally based talent is keeping them focused in the production studio while tracking a show. "I'm not giving you permission to do a sloppy show by asking you to do it voice-tracked," she

says. "I tell them that if they're doing great content and compelling radio, it doesn't matter if they're sitting in the studio right that second or if they did it earlier that day."

But everyone has a bad day now and then. Clear Channel CHR/top 40 WAKS/Cleveland APD/MD Kasper, who hosts afternoons and tracks several stations, says, "I save a lot of my stuff just in case I need to use it down the road. I won't over-rely on it or use it six times, but if it's been a few months and if I'm having a bad day, I'll go back to that."

In West's opinion, motivation comes from within: "You either have passion to do it or you don't. It shows."

Jacobs' Cunningham only sees one way to keep talent focused. "It's holding their job over their heads," he says. "It's contingent on them keeping their jobs at the station to not mail it in. If they aren't to some degree self-motivated to not cut corners and always put on the best show they can, maybe they're not right for you."

Cunningham adds one suggestion to help talent stay in the mood while tracking. "They ought to crank the music in their headphones and listen to the last minute-and-a-half of the record before they do their break, so they get into the mode of the music a little bit. Too often a lot of

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Tesh Success

Clear Channel/Omaha cluster OM Michelle Matthews says taking the voice-tracked version of the syndicated John Tesh show for classic hits KGOR has been a "real success." In the winter 2008 Arbitron, Tesh ranked No. 1 in the market with adults 35-64, second in men 35-64 and third in women 35-64.—MS



Being Prepared

With five stations that are primarily voice-tracked or carrying syndication during nighttime and weekend hours, Clear Channel/Omaha cluster OM Michelle Matthews worries about staffing up the stations in a hurry in case of inclement weather or other potential disasters.

At Radio & Records' 2008 Talk Radio Seminar, a panel on preparing for disasters addressed similar issues with suggestions that are relevant to any station, regardless of format.

■ In emergency situations, everyone on staff becomes a reporter. Personnel from all departments should be trained ahead of time to be able to help

report developments.

■ Preparations are useless unless the staff knows about them. Address emergency plans with the entire staff at least four times per year.

■ Extended power outages may mean the station will need cash. No power means no way to process credit cards, and ATMs are shut down.

■ If your station is short on staff, make arrangements with other stations in nearby cities to swap personnel as the situation warrants.

■ In particularly bad situations, provide a place for staffers to sleep and put someone in charge of bringing in food, water, cots and bedding.—MS



Michelle Matthews

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voice-track jocks take the music for granted and just listen to the last 10 seconds, thinking, 'I know the Foo Fighters record.' ”

Beyond The Tracks

It's ironic to Matthews that the station with the most voice-tracking in her Omaha cluster, KGOR, is among the outlets with the most personality. On this station alone, Matthews extends her local morning show, with host Dave Wingert tracking 10 a.m.-noon. Noon-5 p.m. is tracked by Lucy Chapman, who is never in the studio “unless she's giving something away, then she'll go live for a few minutes,” Matthews says. Then it's straight into the voice-tracked version of the syndicated John Tesh show, which Matthews describes as “a real success for KGOR.” The station adds traffic and news reports to keep a local feel and Tesh accommodates with personalized voice work. “We've really been able to take his breaks and add our personality and imaging around them,” Matthews says.

Finding extra ways to incorporate voice-tracked hosts into the station, such as the addition-



Kasper

Lessons Learned

By the time Randi West made the leap to programming and took over Clear Channel CHR/top 40 WDCG (G105)/Raleigh, she had voice-tracked some 18 different Clear Channel stations. Working with so many programmers definitely taught her a few things. “I knew how I was going to manage my people,” she says, pointing to four lessons she gleaned from that experience, which she is passing on to her staff.

- Have fun.
- Have passion.
- Have the integrity of the art form, not the ego.
- Be organized.—MS

al voicing from Tesh, is invaluable to making personalities sound local. “You have to think beyond the voice-tracking,” West says. “I offer up anything I possibly can. I do endorsements and spots for other markets. It just adds to the continuity of the radio station.” After all, West asks, wouldn't it be odd to hear her show five hours per day, five days per week, but never anywhere else on the station?

One part of voice-tracking that draws a difference of opinion is the ability to use the technology to make every break perfect. At one end of the spectrum, Kasper says, “You have to get rid of the mentality of, ‘Oh, it's tracked, so I can do it over again.’ You just end up doing it over and over again.” Instead, he says, “envision that break as being live. You'll have more of a natural sound when you're doing it.”

Diametrically opposed to such a point of view are Cunningham and Matthews. “I try to tell my staff that this is an opportunity not to half-ass it, but to really sit down and do your breaks right,” Matthews says. Cunningham adds, “Since jocks have the opportunity for ‘do-overs’ because they are in the studio, it creates an environment where there is no reason not to expect a voice-track shift to sound perfect. Every jock ought to listen to every break they do in the voice-track room to make sure they are comfortable with it.”

As low key as smooth jazz is, Lopez splits the difference. “I try to make it as natural as possible and not to sound like an automaton. I don't go back in and fine-tune and take out breaths and stuff like that.” On the other hand, she says, “If



Maria Lopez

there's a promo I have to do and I really fuck it up, I can fix it. That's an advantage. I can sound like I never really royally fuck up.”

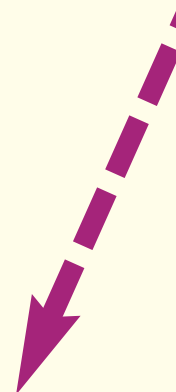
Serving The Community

Matthews brings up a major concern facing voice-tracked stations: being able to go live when faced with breaking news. “It's tough to be able to turn on a dime when you need to and have the manpower in those crucial hours when you need bodies in the building. What you can't afford to sacrifice is the immediacy that local radio is about in those times. Those are the moments that you need to be live and be available to your listeners,” she says.

For her cluster, Matthews says, “We have procedures in place for weekends. There are lists of contacts, and staffers know who to get a hold of in situations.”

West says that the perception that out-of-town talent do not care about the community simply isn't accurate. “The reality is that you have to care because it's a reflection of you.” She recalls the morning the space shuttle Columbia exploded on re-entry. “I was tracking a weekend show for Charleston, S.C. I drove to the radio station, followed the news coverage and sent them new breaks.” For her, it's about pride in the product. “The reality is, you can be as good as you want to be. To the listener, the only person who sounds stupid is you.”

R&R



Geography Should Not Affect Airchecks

A trio of veteran voice-trackers that has collectively worked for dozens of programmers all say essentially the same thing about feedback they received on their work. “It was spot-ty,” says Clear Channel's Smooth Jazz Network night host Maria Lopez, who until recently ran her own voice-tracking business. “Some guys really come at you with, ‘Wow, you sound great,’ and some you never hear from at all. Some are really hands-on and some aren't. As long as they were sending me logs, I figured they were happy.”

Clear Channel CHR/top 40 WDCG (G105)/Raleigh PD/afternoon host Randi West, who at one point was voice-tracking 18 stations, says every station has its own personality because

every PD is fundamentally different. She also says that some were more hands-on than others.

Frequently getting contrary feedback, West tried to find balance. “You have to fit into your daypart and your environment and the personality of the radio station. You also have to be true to your art form. All personalities have their own style. You have to fit into the environment and be an actor. It's a matter of figuring out how I can be this person the programmer wants and still do the show I want to do.”

Clear Channel CHR/top 40 WAKS/Cleveland APD/MD/afternoon host Kasper says he's seen more programmers take the hands-off approach. Kasper, who generally tracks three or four other

stations at any given time, says he's “never had a sitdown to go over a complete show aircheck. Naturally, at first you do talk more, just to get a feel for each other and the sound of the station. After that initial period of time, you're good to go and they are going to let you know if you do something wrong or if you could do something more.”

Bristling at the lack of proactive programmers is Jacobs Media consultant Keith Cunningham, who says programmers need to “take the voice-track label off the shift and aircheck jocks just as you would a full-time personality that is live every day. Find the time to listen to the shows and sit down with them.”

The only difference should be that the meeting is over the phone. “All the things that come with a regular aircheck ought to apply to working with a voice-track jock,” Cunningham says. “The session is different by virtue of them not being in the same room, but the end result is the same. The jock not living in my market is not an excuse.”

On a daily basis, Cunningham says, programmers should listen to voice-tracks before they air. “You can't mispronounce street names or club names. It sounds ridiculous. There's no excuse for that. Have someone listen to all the voice-tracks before they hit the air to make sure there isn't an obvious gaffe like that.”

While overworked program-

mers may groan at the suggestion, Cunningham points out that “if it's a music-intensive station, the breaks aren't that long. There are maybe 15 minutes of jock breaks in a midday shift. Find 15-20 minutes to listen to the breaks and if one isn't good, take it out and have them recut it.”—MS



Keith Cunningham