

THE NIGHT SHIFT



Syndication, Voice-Tracking And Lack Of Local Content Have Changed The Evening

Landscape At Radio—But The New Topography Is Working For Many p.8



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By R.J. Curtis ■ Illustration By Glorioso Fajardo

There are two harsh realities working in radio now: Either you've witnessed significant downsizing, or you soon will. That's not simply a glass-half-empty outlook, it's the truth, evidenced by the numerous layoffs that have continued into the new year.

■ Even before the economy went from bad to horrendous last September, a multitude of stations were already forced to make budget cuts. One of the first casualties is the live and local evening personality—replaced by voice-tracking imported from a sister station's jock, syndicated programming or in some cases, a totally jockless presentation.

Evenings are particularly challenging for adult-formatted stations, whose listeners, for a host of reasons including family obligations, TV, and the Internet, don't use the radio as much between 7 p.m. and midnight. As Scott Valentine, programmer for Crista Ministries' Christian AC KCMS/Seattle, says, "If you can win in nights on an adult-formatted station, you're really doing something amazing."

Wess Nessman, PD at Gap Broadcasting's active rock KFMX/Lubbock, Texas, said he turned to syndicated programming at night out of necessity, admitting the quality is better but is struggling with the idea that it's not local. Valentine offers a different perspective: He does the morning show—which itself is syndicated—while his live, local evening personality is syndicated to other stations.

Entercom Communications launched two in-house syndicated evening shows last year, one each for its AC- and country-formatted stations. The objective, VP of programming Bill Pasha says, was to "raise the content game for two of our biggest format groups."

Then there's John Tesh, whose nationally syn-

dicated radio show "Intelligence for Your Life" has steadily increased its affiliate base to nearly 300 stations in the United States and Canada—unusually, across all dayparts.

Case In Point

Nessman's KFMX is the No. 1-ranked station in the market based on the last available Arbitron ratings book from spring 2008. A big part of its 9.4 12+ share, he says, came from "the monster night numbers." But that was before FMX ditched its local evening show in favor of United Stations Radio Networks' "hardDrive XL," hosted by Lou Brutus.

"The truth of the matter is, this was an economic change," says Nessman, who describes a scenario that is familiar to many programmers these days. "It's hard when you're part of a corporation and they say the night jock has to go," he says. "You say, 'Wait a minute, we have these monster numbers,' and they say, 'But we're never going to be able to sell monster rates at night, regardless of the numbers.'" Faced with the possibility of extending existing shifts or going jockless,

Syndication, voice-tracking and a lack of local content have changed the evening landscape at radio—but the new topography is working for many

Nessman turned to Brutus' show. "Lou does an exceptional active rock nighttime show. He's got guest artists each week, news, features, and he plays songs that are so close to my format it was a natural fit."

Nessman began airing "hardDrive XL" six months ago and says cutting his night guy was tough. "But I looked around and I found something that is—I hate to say it—better."

While Nessman's programming ear keeps telling him the new evening show is "way more listenable, consistent, intriguing and produced," his many years in the market and at his station had him wondering how listeners would react to not being able to reach their jocks on the phone as they have for the past 28 years. KFMX has always thrived on interactivity, he says. "The kids here were used to calling and hearing their song 10 minutes later."

Nessman feels Brutus' syndicated show could lead KFMX "into a new era of dominating the market," but he also knows he doesn't get to fill out a diary.

The lack of instant gratification for active rock listeners in Lubbock is the only hesitation for Nessman now, who hopes "that people who need that kind of immediacy gravitate toward our daytime shifts." Until he gets the fall book, Nessman won't really know, but even then he says, it's just one book. "I don't think you give a DJ a fair chance if you don't give them a year-and-a-half."

Listeners will ultimately decide whether the tough love necessitated by economics will be good for evening shares on KFMX, but Nessman says the experience may have coined a new slogan for people who are resistant to change, even when something like this is looming over them. "How about, 'Budget cuts forced me to get up off my ass and make the best programming decision for my station'? Maybe that's what I should say."

Surrounded By Syndication

Valentine's KCMS, meanwhile, is a top 10-ranked station 12+. His "Scott & Sam" morning show is syndicated nationally, and his night jock Martha Hadley is syndicated through owner Crista Ministries. Hadley's show originates from KCMS and has been quite successful, at times beating the powerful syndicated AC queen Delilah on her home turf in Seattle.

Valentine agrees that the majority of adult-targeted stations are most productive from 6 a.m. to 7 p.m., but he also says there are a number of evening shows available to his format "that trump the local component," singling out Delilah,

Hadley and Tesh. The Christian format, he says, is high-touch, much like country radio, where listeners become emotionally involved in their favorite station.

When opting for syndicated shows at night— even those that are highly interactive—the challenge is finding a way for the local audience to participate. That's possible, Valentine says, "if you have savvy programmers locally."

For example, by setting up a line where someone is always there to take calls, "you can take compelling phones and find a way to weave them on the air." With a high volume of calls, Valentine insists stations can "more than make up for the loss of localism" by the value and the content of what they put on the air, along with great imaging. In general, Valentine says syndicated nights are better-positioned to succeed when they offer novel content—citing Tesh's show: "He has a home run with that idea."

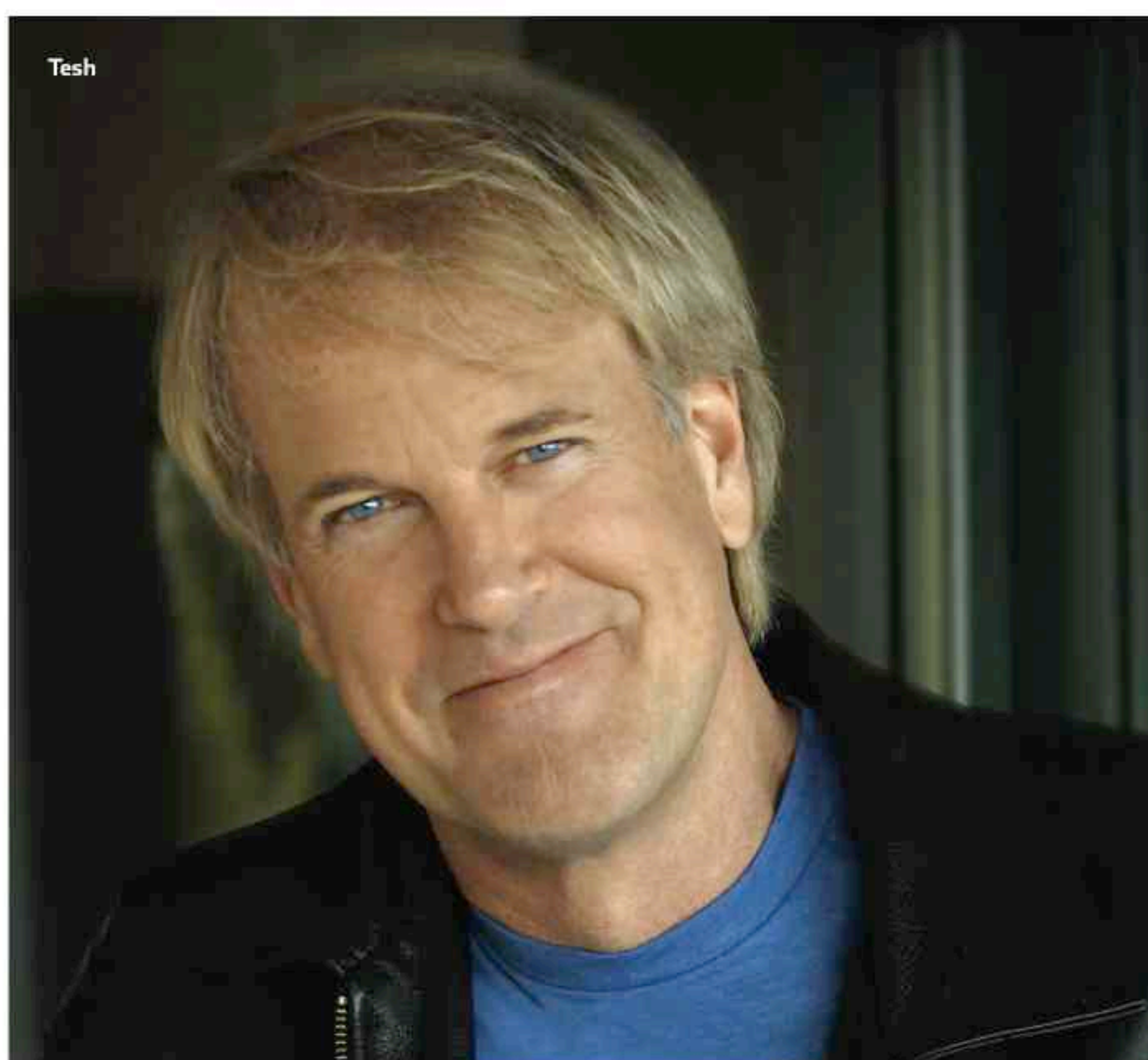
More than syndication, what Valentine sees as a common nighttime solution is voice-tracking from other markets. Where that system falters, he says, "is when you have one person tracking five or six stations. How compelling can they be when they're spending a chunk of their time every day just trying to knock those shows out?"

More Humanizing

With more budget cuts imminent, coupled with the challenge of pulling decent night shares—at least with adult stations—should the industry even care about nights? Valentine feels strongly that it should. "When is it that you'd like to go into Starbucks and not have a barista there? When will a vending machine replace the people serving up the doughnuts at Krispy Kreme?" A flood of technology provides an opportunity "to make radio behave like it should: less automation and more humanizing," he says.

He also suggests that the rise in social networking speaks to the need for personal connections. "People want relationships, and radio is still in the vanguard of being able to provide that—and break new music and provide entertainment. People want to look through the keyhole and see where they are in their life by seeing where everybody else is messed up or has figured things out."

Rather than throwing in the towel on nights, Valentine says, "They're probably more viable now than at any other time in history," describing the daypart as having "a little campfire quality to it." Additionally, "If people are going to bed and setting their clock radio, you know who they're waking up to, so the daypart is still powerful."



Tesh

Entercom-Only Syndication

As the industry has seen in the last few years, the most common reason for eliminating the evening position is cost-cutting. So it probably seems counterintuitive when Entercom's Pasha explains that launching two syndicated nighttime shows last year was actually a more expensive proposition than keeping local talent onboard.

First up was the spring debut of "Your Time With Kim Iverson" for the company's eight AC stations. In late summer came "The 2nd Shift With Alan Kabel," for its seven country outlets, originating from KWJJ (99.5 the Wolf)/Portland, Ore. The motivation for both programs, he says, "was to do something that would significantly change the game to make radio even more attractive than it was at night."

With statistics showing 94% of the country audience still using radio every week, Pasha, with Entercom senior VP of programming Pat Paxton and president/CEO David Field, believed they could significantly improve upon the existing product "without regard for whether or not it was going to cause an immediate ratings jump." In spite of the costs required to hire two talents worthy of national syndication and their producers, plus creating distribution and studio space, Pasha says, "We really felt like it would pay off in listeners saying, 'This is

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'A lot of people are looking for something useful in their life. I think more and more, people are looking for some guidance and encouragement.'

—John Tesh

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much better content for us.”

Pasha says the main goal of the country and AC projects was to make the programs fit the markets where they would air. In short, Entercom customized the shows to the needs and culture of the company. “You have to understand that the vast majority of syndicated products are offered by syndication companies, whose primary job is to sell spots in syndication, not to do great programming for local markets.” That’s what sets these two projects apart from many others, he believes. “It’s broadcasting done by broadcasters for broadcasters.”

At this point, neither show carries any national spots, nor were they designed with the idea of Entercom syndicating them outside of the company. “We had a lot of people look into that with us in the beginning, and we decided we wanted to make sure these products are as good as they can be before making them available to anybody else. First and foremost, our obligation is to an industry that has treated us really well.”

At the station level, Pasha says that initially there were a lot of questions, but no real pushback. That’s likely because he was sensitive to his own experiences with other companies as a PD, “where somebody from the top down would say, ‘Hey, you need to take this.’” He insists “that was not the way this was approached. We explained to everybody what we felt the benefits were. We got input prior to doing it and we formed subcommittees that helped review the talent we selected.”

So far, Iverson’s hot AC show has two books under its belt, spring and summer of 2008, while Kabel’s country show has two-thirds of last spring and all of summer. Airing the hot AC show, WTSS/Buffalo jumped 4.8-8.2 in women 18-34 from summer to fall 2008 in the 7 p.m.-midnight daypart, according to Pasha, and 7.1-10.4 in women 25-54 to rank second. No fall numbers are in for WMC/Memphis yet, but the station saw a nighttime increase in 18-34 persons (0.8-4.0, spring to summer). In her first book at KALC/Denver (summer 2008), Iverson went 6.0-15.2 in women 18-34. She recently added a ninth station, when Entercom flipped KBLV/Kansas City from classic rock to hot AC, as KKSJ. Kabel’s country show, meanwhile, skyrocketed 5.5-12.0 in persons 18-34 at WGGY/Wilkes-Barre in the fall 2008 survey. While fall numbers haven’t been released at Kabel’s home base of KWJJ (the Wolf)/Portland, the station improved 9.3-9.9 spring to summer in persons 25-54.

Offering a thumbnail sketch of the type of personality the company was looking for when casting each show, Pasha says that at the top of the list was a set of basic skills that could be carried out by most qualified broadcasters. But at the next level, Pasha says, “it takes special people to be able to talk to a nation. People who live in North Carolina have a very different life experience than someone who lives in Seattle. Our hosts have to relate to all these people.”

Iverson, for example, “is not unique among women, and that’s her greatest asset. If you’re a girl, she’s your girlfriend. If you’re a guy, she’s giving you



Valentine

‘The vast majority of syndicated products are offered by syndication companies, whose primary job is to sell spots in syndication—not to do great programming for local markets.’

—Bill Pasha

the other team’s playbook.” Kabel’s show is all about having a party all the time, Pasha says. “He’s a little quirky and self-deprecating. He’s not what a radio programmer might expect of a country nighttime host. But so far, ratings and listener response indicates that when you’re a good person, relate to your audience, live the same way they do and reveal yourself, those qualities make you successful.”

The King Of Content

Tesh’s show could hardly be considered a testing ground at this stage. Since launching a daily version of “Intelligence for Your Life” in 2003, the program is now ubiquitous, with hundreds of affiliates in the United States and Canada. Part of the credit for the show’s concept should go to Tesh’s wife, Connie Sellecca, because that’s who it was designed for.

Sellecca was not a big radio fan, Tesh says, because she considered most of it “goofiness, time and temp, and contests.” At the same time, Sellecca was an information junkie, known for bookmarking magazine articles filled with useful tidbits for later possible use.

Tesh’s show is packed with information, thanks to a diligent staff of 10 researchers whose sole job description, Tesh says, “is to read stuff and bring me material.”

Tesh has a belief that perhaps flies in the face of broadcasters who theorize that adult listeners don’t use radio because they’re occupied with other stimuli at night, primarily TV. “With the glut of crazy shows on TV and the Internet, there may be a fair amount of people who want to shut off the TV and embrace the radio,” he says. There are a number of reasons for that: Tesh cites anecdotal feedback from among his affiliates across the United States and Canada that tell him “this is what my kids can listen to at night.” Additionally, he believes that instead of outrageous reality TV shows, “a lot of people are looking for something useful in their life. I think more and more, people are looking for some guidance and encouragement—a voice where they can be comfortable



Pasha

and so can the family.”

That concept speaks directly to what KCMS’ Valentine calls the “campfire quality” of nights that listeners are seeking. According to Scott Meyers, executive producer of Tesh’s show, about 65% of affiliates run it at night, although it’s also found in mornings, middays and afternoons. Naturally, Tesh is happy to be on so many stations in so many dayparts, but says, “I’ve always thought this was an afternoon or evening show, because people driving home could get three tips on how to improve their marriage, have a better dinner or talk to their kids differently.”

What sets the Tesh show apart from other syndicated programs, ironically, is his non-radio background. That may sound odd, since Tesh was practically a household name from 13 years as host of TV’s “Entertainment Tonight” and numerous other assignments covering such events as the Olympics and Tour de France. According to Tesh, “I have a pleasing voice to listen to and I guess it’s recognizable, but I can’t do the morning show or afternoon show the way somebody in radio can.”

And because he is also an accomplished musician, Tesh draws on an analogy from his experience performing onstage to describe how he found his own style as a radio host: “You think, ‘I have to play like Chick Corea, Herbie Hancock or Keith Jarrett,’ but no, play like yourself, in your comfort zone. So I finally found that for myself.”

Tesh is the first to admit that he can’t do bits and the typical radio schtick, but a friend in radio advised him to “just do what you’re comfortable doing.” For Tesh, that was storytelling. The combination of useful content, good narrative and a discipline for maintaining the “Intelligence for Your Life” brand, plus the advantage of not being owned by a big company, has resulted in steady affiliate growth and a product that is unique and compelling. Tesh says, “We have been able to do what we wanted and let it grow.” **R&R**