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Get Off The Road: Consultants who become PDs again

The Inside Story with Mike Kinosian/INSIDE RADIO contributing Editor

Democracy Lives

When PD Jay McCarthy exited Clear Channel's WWYZ/Hartford more than two years ago, longtime consultant Pete Salant presented himself as a potential successor, but was turned down. "Consulting was drying up [after] consolidation," he remarks. "I'd been producing television spots at home for about a year [but] realized it wouldn't be the kind of work that would produce a steady income."

So it was fortuitous that when the "Country 92.5" programming position again became vacant in July 2005, GM Manuel Rodriguez remembered Salant and invited him to come aboard. "He runs this cluster like something close to a democracy," notes Salant, who programmed for several months at Cumulus/Danbury, CT before joining WWYZ. "He has a lot of autonomy and, consequently, we do too."

Soul Proprietorship

The front man of North Haven, CT-based Pete Salant Broadcast Consultant branched out to Pete Salant Media Consulting & Production. Conceding that companies like FilmHouse and Shark do tremendous work, Salant identified a niche for graphics-only spots and music videos and animated stills. "I'd do the spots at low-price points, and had a bunch of takers. It was - and is - a sole proprietorship."

Buying sophisticated equipment and maintaining studios can become an expensive proposition. It also takes a long time to put together a 30-second spot. "For virtually all my programming career, I'd been involved with production of the television commercials. In the late-1990s, it became possible to produce broadcast-quality television spots on desktop PCs. It was equally as fascinating to me as programming."

A hole existed and Salant proceeded to satisfy it with past clients. "I found myself busy for three months in the spring and [an equal amount of time] in the fall," he explains. "But people aren't going to buy TV commercials when they don't need them."

Winning Experience

In advance of the Danbury stint, 20 years had gone by since Salant last performed day-to-day programming duties. Previous PD assignments ran the gamut from WAVZ/New Haven to NBC's WYNY/New York City, but Salant concedes he's programmed only a handful of stations. "KC101 [WKCI/New Haven] was a highlight. I was only there a year, but was the PD who [in 1979] suggested the owners allow him to flip the format from Easy Listening to [a format that would become known as] Hot AC."

After two years of being a consultant, Salant took two years off as owner/operator of then-silent AM daytimer WNNR "WinnerRadio"/Hamden, CT. "I assumed the obligations to the electric company and a couple of others, so I basically got it for nothing," he acknowledges. "I put it back on the air and we were highly successful in AM Stereo as an Oldies station. We set new records, [including] several \$50,000 billing months, which were great for a little [station]. I did air-work, sold and was the Chief Engineer, [although] I didn't touch the transmitter because I was afraid of it."

A year later, though, something Salant feared would eventually happen became reality when WDRC-FM/Hartford flipped to Oldies. "There we were with 1,000 watts, but I look back upon [the experience] as being paid for two years of graduate school. I went right back into consulting with both feet."

The WNNR phase taught Salant what it takes to be an entrepreneur and he jokes, "I learned that paper clips matter. In every consulting assignment, I treated the station as if I owned it. That mentality will get you far."

Being Held Accountable

Since he had several corporate deals, it's difficult to say precisely how many clients Salant consulted. "I worked with Three Eagles Communications, which owns stations in Nebraska and Iowa," he points out. "I worked for them for one substantial, flat fee and was directed where the need existed. There were 43

stations, but I don't count them as 43 clients. I was fortunate to be able to command more than competitive fees. It was a very exciting 20 years."

Checks and balances must exist and there needs to be centralized control over areas like bookkeeping and budgeting, but Salant opines that no two companies handle that level of centralization the same. "Some like Clear Channel offer much more autonomy on the local level," he maintains. "They fully understand if they expect a programmer to be accountable, they have to let that person make most of the decisions that lead to the success. Otherwise, there can be no accountability. If I can make a good case to spend money, it will be spent. I'm given the opportunity to participate in the process of finding the money. It's an exercise from the old days of ownership and I find it fascinating. If I can save some money, perhaps I can buy a custom jingle package. That's one neat thing about the larger scale upon which radio is now being executed."

Familiar With The Format

Well known in AC and Oldies circles, Salant actually had more Country clients in the last five years of his consultancy than any other format. "I'm not a format newcomer and love the fact [WWYZ] is the only Country station in our coverage area [although] we overlap a little bit with WCTK/Providence," he remarks. "My first job was writing copy at a New Jersey Country station in the summer between my junior/senior years in high school. Great radio is great radio and that's all that matters."

Since he wasn't on the road as often as most other consultants, Salant acknowledges his colleagues have racked up many more frequent flyer miles. "At the most, I traveled once a month," he explains. "I'd see two clients per trip and then have two weeks off before I'd fly again. I was able to make a dandy living from pretty much the same people. I never had to advertise and didn't attend trade conventions because it would have meant more travel."

Off And Running

With his focus completely on "Country 92.5," Salant has no plans to do any consulting work on the side.

It's clear his energy the past several months was well spent as WWYZ's fall ratings results were impressive: Only sister CHR/Pop WKSS (3.7-6.3) had a greater fall-fall (12+) increase than WWYZ (5.8 - 7.9, No. 3).

There are times a consultant's role can be frustrating and, to Salant, comparable to being a grandparent. "You visit with the kids and leave," he comments. "I'd rather have the payoff of hearing what I've helped craft or helped the staff put into play. There's an awful lot of gratification. I'm now responsible for paving the way for a lot of dollars to be made and see an already excellent radio station become great. I also lead a team of mature, sensitive individuals who are extremely talented; afternoon driver Floyd Wright and I have been friends for over 30 years. I'd like to stay for as long as I continue to accomplish the goals expected of me."