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# Beverlee Brannigan

## Prepared & Listening

**F**rom Journal to Scripps to Summit, VP/Programming Beverlee Brannigan has been a steady hand through a five-year succession of ownership changes. The company's seven Country stations in 10 markets certainly benefit from her deep understanding of the format, including her longstanding involvement with CRS as a board member and moderator. And her role as Summit/Wichita Market President keeps her intimately acquainted with the challenges and opportunities afforded by locally focused radio. Not surprising for someone excelling in multiple roles, Brannigan has an uncluttered view of what matters – for the business as well as the people in it.

**CA:** What have those ownership transitions been like for you, and how have you handled that in leading your staff?

**BB:** Transition is difficult for everyone, but thinking back over the course of those years, our team has handled it remarkably well. When someone tells you there's going to be new ownership, there are all sorts of questions and concerns. Understandably, everyone wonders how that's going to affect their personal situation. The companies have been very different, and I'm just really proud of how the team navigated it. Systems change, business models change, and you've just got to be adept. And the change you experience in an ownership change is also sort of a microcosm of our changing industry.

### THE INTERVIEW

**What have the cultural changes been, and what does that look like now with Summit?**

A publicly traded company, which we were as Journal and as part of Scripps, operates in very different ways than a privately held company like Summit. There's a certain sense of relief in not having to look at the quarter in the same way we did. That horse race toward goals we're trying to accomplish looks very different. There's something to be said for the nimbleness of a company that's not publicly traded, too. We have the ability to turn on a dime when someone has a great idea, and if it doesn't work out you can course correct pretty easily. Without tons of layers, it's a flatter way of doing business.

**How does your corporate programming role intersect with your colleagues?**

I was lucky to join two people in Summit programming – SVP Bill Tanner and VP John Olsen. They're at headquarters in Birmingham and, when Scripps sold to Summit, I was – I don't know – an add-on. They didn't know me from Adam but became familiar with my work and my love of country music and Country radio. They said, "We'd like you to do what you can to contribute to our programming team while still GM in Wichita." Working with them has honestly been one of the highlights of joining Summit, because they're super smart and have great ears. Programming across all formats is what they do all day long, and I occasionally get to add my two cents. The company is very well known for its Urban efforts and Top 40. There are formats I don't know the first thing about, but I do know Rock and have some competency in a few formats I got to work with through Journal and Scripps. The other thing is, I knew the Scripps markets and have been able to fill in the blanks for them with what worked well, what didn't, who the talents are and so forth. I helped translate through the transition, and they were all ears.

**Is there an overriding programming philosophy applied at Summit?**

John, Bill and I just had this conversation the other day. We share common values in expecting our programmers to spend time listening to their radio station. That seems so simple, right? But the way many companies do business these days, and with how people get stuck in data and assigned reports, a programmer can get through a day without actually listening. It happens a lot. We try to make sure we're taking time to listen. Is that a philosophy? Maybe it's more something that we value. You can spend

all day in strategy meetings with the very best in your company – consultants, research people, whoever – and develop a great strategy. If you don't listen to determine if what you want to be happening is actually happening, then it's all lost.

**How do you balance being a market president and corporate programming responsibilities? What's a day like for you?**

The market piece is always first and really kind of Jekyll and Hyde some days. Yesterday is an interesting example. I spent part of the day on a research presentation, so my brain was in programming land. Then I had to turn because I'm in the process of recruiting a new receptionist, so I spent some time in interviews. In the afternoon I was working on the budget with the sales manager. Some days get eaten by an HR crisis in the building. It's everything and exactly what you think it would be. There are no dull days.

**From the market and programming standpoints, what's most pressing in today's environment? Where are the key challenges demanding adaptation from radio?**

In programming, perhaps the biggest single challenge is finding and hiring talent who can create entertaining content and experiences on the radio. We used to say, "We need talent, let's go look in a slightly smaller market and find someone who's ready to move up." That's so rare anymore. First of all, people are not relocating like they used to. Then it's just hard to find people who have an aspiration in that way. There aren't as many people seeking to devote their whole career to radio. There's plenty of talent in radio, but companies are recognizing that and compensating them in a way that keeps them from going anywhere.

It makes you think twice when maybe you'd otherwise hope to make a change with a certain daypart. It's twice as difficult as it used to be to find a talent who will be an improvement over the one you're not happy with. If someone says, "I think we want to change this morning show," I sarcastically say, "Just go to the morning show store and pick out a new one you like." It used to be like that. It's not anymore.

**And the market side?**

In a larger business sense our challenges are people's attention being split into a million pieces. In the same way people aren't sitting down to watch network television at eight o'clock every night, they don't tune into the radio with rapt attention as they once did. Every year that passes fractures their attention a little more.

**Are there opportunities that come with these changes? Ways radio might take advantage or find solutions?**

I'm an eternal optimist, so I'm going to say yes. That comes from identifying people who are perhaps adjacent to our industry, who can still see the forest for the trees.



Maybe they have new ideas, crazy ideas. We should be paying attention to those people, capturing them and pulling them into radio. We are absolutely going to be healthy in the long term by embracing people and ideas that are new and different. The longer you do this, the harder it is to have bright, inspiring ideas. We know how to do this thing that we've done for so long, but our ears have to be open to younger people on the fringes who are seeing it differently. Their context and vision will grow our future. We're so ingrained and you do need institutional knowledge so you don't reinvent the wheel, so it's collective IQ that incorporates those fresh ideas.

## THE INTERVIEW

**Country seems to be moving at two different speeds: The streaming world of aggressive music consumers who drive revenue for labels, and the broader fan base including the Country radio audience, who seem to be learning about and engaging with new music and artists at the same rate as ever. Does that concern you?**

It's certainly divergent. There was a long period where the business of Country radio – serving listeners – and the business of labels – serving the people who bought their product – were very tightly enmeshed. It is diverging because our revenue streams are divergent. It's going to take its course. Labels need to follow their revenue, and some of the people consuming their music are radio listeners. Radio has to follow listeners, because we're in the business of delivering advertising messages to them. We intersect at the artist level.

It matters to all of us whether the music is good, but the market cycle is going to be different for each. That's okay, I think. We can't expect to be on the same schedule all the time, and that doesn't change our desire to be partnered and supportive of one another when it comes to the artists. The days are gone where there's one chart and everyone is in lockstep. We're using different metrics that serve everyone differently. You can't stop market forces.

**Has the ongoing discussion about female artists on the radio, which you've been a part of, changed your mind or influenced your approach to programming?**

Keep in mind that I don't program on a daily basis – I don't have hands on a music log. We have programmers in our markets making individual music decisions, which is one thing I'm very proud about in our company. Can you ask the question another way?

**How has your thinking on the topic evolved over the course of this continuing attention and discussion?**

First, I am delighted to see some female artists with really strong songs right now. Off the top of my head, Ingrid Andress, Gabby Barrett and other new women are introducing really, really good music.

I tend to come down in a more traditional programming way, if I had to fall on one side of the argument or the other. I don't think any programmer, male or female, is making music decisions based on gender. I just don't think that happens – hardly ever. Programmers are using their very best instincts and data to make song choices every week. I don't think they're making those choices gender-wise. However, you can't argue with the data showing numbers of women on playlists. There have been many, many years where it's been better. There's no denying that.

During the CRS360 webinar I moderated, Lindsay Ell asserted it all comes back to the song, that there is progress and that there will continue to be. I agree with that. When you look at the artists in development working their way up the chart with some really great songs – not just okay songs – it's very encouraging.

**Is that an issue programmers you work with ask you about?**

Oh, yes, of course. I get to be the spokeswoman for all women.

**I'm sure you love that.**

"Let's ask Beverlee, she's a woman." We do talk about it a lot, which is why I can strongly make the assertion that I don't think anyone is making decisions based on gender. They're making it based on songs.

**Do you get fatigued by the woman question – the female in the business question? Couldn't the point be that you're really good at your job and the rest of it doesn't matter?**

That's a really fair question. The answer is yes and no. In my position, I don't think it's fair for me to ever be fatigued with the topic. There are women trying to advance in the industry who legitimately want to know my viewpoint or hear about my experience. So I don't get to be tired of answering that question and will always answer it. Does the thought cross my mind that it's not gender-based at all and just a matter of job performance? I'd be lying if I said it didn't. I don't typically say that out loud, but sometimes I think it.

One of the things I'm sad about is the low percentage of women in programming positions, particularly in country. A PD's job is very, very demanding and always has been. There's a lot of night, remote and weekend work. It's hard. For any woman who has children and wants to be available to her family, it's doubly hard. And a very different task from being, say, an account executive – which isn't to say that's easy either. It's not. Any working woman deals with those challenges, and they can be overwhelming. I don't have children, I just have a husband and a cat to feed. Some women have



family support systems that make that possible and, for some, it's not possible.

The other thing that works against women is that PDs typically rise up from on-air positions, and there were many years where it was heresy to have more than one woman on any given air staff. As air staffs have shrunk, the percentages go even smaller.

It's hard, but it's a wonderful job and there are certainly lots of smart, qualified women who have what it takes to pursue programming, and I hope they do.

**The culture does seem to be a shift toward recognizing that a more balanced approach to work and life is a better long-term model for everyone – men and women. Perhaps that will open things up to contributions from a wider group of people.**

Totally agree. Things are moving to a more moderate work schedule. Maybe that's going to allow companies to think a little bit differently about how to accommodate people who might want to have a family and be a program director. You also see more and more men and women sharing family responsibilities. We see lots of men with family responsibilities, and we accommodate that.

**We share common values in expecting our programmers to spend time listening to their radio station. That seems so simple, right? ■**

**In that vein, you were a programmer at 24**

I know. Isn't it crazy? I was terrible, by the way. Horrible. I had no business having that job.

**What were the obstacles you had to overcome along the way? Are those still there for others or have they changed?**

It's so funny you bring that up because, I'm not lying, I was not a good PD at 24. The biggest obstacle, and would be for anyone programming at that age, is trying to direct and lead people older and more experienced than you. That's a really tough dynamic. It would be a unique person who would be really accomplished as a leader with a team of people who have been around longer and are better at everything than you are. Oh, and I was a woman, too. That's really, really hard. It took a while and the opportunity to work with other stronger, better, smarter, more skilled leaders. And I had the good fortune to run into a number of them along the way.

**Is radio an industry where chances like that can still be taken on young people?**

It's probably less likely. That was with Fuller-Jeffrey Broadcasting, a very small, privately held company. I was working for them in New Hampshire, and they were expanding into Iowa. Honestly, I think I was an easy and cheap solution – everything was on a bit of a budget. I was a single woman, easy to relocate and didn't cost a ton of money. It was fun, but that's not a scenario that happens an awful lot anymore.

**You've been at the core of CRS for years as a moderator and board member through a lot of transition. Where do you think the organization and event are heading?**

We could be seeing the start of a growth spurt. The business has changed significantly and the stakeholders are expanding. Radio, our label partners and ancillary businesses like DSPs have common interests. We're definitely operating under different business models, but CRS has been at the center of keeping the Country format strong for decades. Our ability to partner with one another makes all of us stronger.

I believe in that centralized place where we come together and talk about whatever challenges we're facing in any particular year. We hear different points of view, get angry, get happy and have that touch-point. That's what will keep us all vital for years to come. We've got the first 50 years under our belts, let's see what else we can accomplish.

**At every level, country music sets itself apart by having those conversations, and CRS may be the embodiment of that. Doesn't happen in other genres.** No, it doesn't. I feel sad for people in other formats that don't have this kind of connection. I know some people think it's just like a big cocktail party, but it's not. There's connection and real caring about what we all do – a consideration to the needs each person and aspect of the industry has to be successful. Another reason we might be looking at growth is the CRS experience's expansion beyond those three days in Nashville. We're keeping the conversation going with the webinars, thereby being attentive to the hot topics throughout the year.

**We see you leading interviews and panels at CRS, and you're so smooth and in command. What's your education been in doing interviews? How have you developed that ability? Share some secrets!**

The biggest secret is preparation. The interviews you're talking about at CRS are with [CRB Exec. Dir.] RJ Curtis and, what people don't see is hours and hours of preparation. The other thing is, it's not about me. If you're doing an interview, it's not about you. Nothing has been cooler than getting to sit onstage and interview Keith Urban, for instance, who is just a marvelous person. The fact that I'm the person in the chair next to him is meaningless. My job is to help him feel comfortable so that he'll say something our audience hasn't heard before. You know you've had a successful interview when you get someone to a point where they are comfortable enough to really share. We had a moment like that with Jason Aldean, who for the first time really shared his thoughts and feelings about the Las Vegas shooting. Those moments come from making the interviewee comfortable expressing something in a way that's really true to themselves. The best way to get there is to be prepared.

**How's your health?**

My health is fabulous. You're asking because I had breast cancer, diagnosed late last year. I had surgery in January but did not have to have chemo or radiation. I feel the best that I've felt, perhaps in my whole life. As a matter of fact, one of the things I'm doing to keep it from coming back again is exercising. Anyone who knows me knows I'm no athlete, but I've started working out and ran my first whole mile not too long ago. I feel great.

I had so many prayers and good wishes from the country music community. It's really humbling and was very much appreciated. I know that helped to get me whole and healed again.

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