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Global Transmission

An interview with Clive Dickens

Radio continues to evolve. Whether it's AM & FM, digital, online, satellite or podcasting, it's getting harder to keep the audience entertained. With listeners having access to music and other content from around the globe, broadcasters have to take their blinders off and really think about what will attract consumers to their brands.

One of the most proactive minds in the global radio business is Absolute Radio International Program & Operations Director **Clive Dickens**. Dickens has inspired me and many others with his knowledge of the worldwide radio market and his fresh approach to programming. I recently spoke to him about radio today and where he feels it's heading.

Career Synopsis



Clive Dickens

Dickens begins, "If ever I say, 'I have seen it all before, I have given permission to my colleagues to shoot me. After 23 years in radio, the one thing I really have learned is that, in order to survive, every new day must bring new concepts, fresh ideas and innovation. These core values now form the nucleus of everything at my radio company, Absolute Radio, as we strive to be different."

"I started my career as a teenager in local radio just north of London, rising from being the Saturday sports volunteer at a single station to Deputy Programmer over a group of 11 music stations. Then, in 1993, I was headhunted to relaunch Capital Radio's first station outside London, BRMB, in Britain's second-largest city [Birmingham].

"After two highly charged years and taking the station to the highest share in its modern history, I was promoted to Group Head of Programs at Capital, based in London and

overseeing all FM output, including the internationally renowned 95.8 Capital FM.

"Whilst at Capital, I was lucky enough to be in a team that included world-class broadcasting and production talent. We were encouraged by legendary Group PD Richard Park to think of new ideas for our stations each and every day.

"Some of those concepts included creating one of the world's most successful live-music brands, 'Party in the Park,' and developing Capital's music label and nurturing its first signing, Craig David, to global success. We also took musical-playlist risks with the potentially ultraconservative Capital FM audience — at the time 20% of the audience never cumed any other radio station."

About Absolute Radio

"Five years in one of Europe's most competitive radio markets convinced me that a life of independence beckoned, and in 2001 I founded Absolute Radio with two business partners," Dickens says about his desire to move ahead with his own venture.

"Our company is now split into two distinct areas: radio investment and ownership and operational consultancy. We currently operate and co-own the largest privately owned radio station in the U.K., 107.6 Juice FM, which is based in Liverpool.

"Juice is the music and life-style station for Liverpool that delivers strong 18-29 female ratings with a predominantly Urban and Rhythmic music and content strategy. It has recently gone No. 1 in the market at breakfast for 18-24 females after just six months with a new personality, Louis Hurst."

Absolute Radio International is truly a global venture. Dickens says, "In our broadcast-consulting business, we work with market-leading stations across Europe and Asia, including Dublin, Prague, Copenhagen, Vienna and Mumbai.

"Having such a broad set of client stations means we meet more people than the average radio executive. We therefore experience and help create new ideas from vastly different media landscapes and cultures, and that, in

turn, helps us grow our own business in the U.K."

Perspective On Change

"From this vantage point, it is clear that the current rate of change in attitude to radio from consumers, particularly the young, is nothing short of incredible," Dickens continues. "Whether it's the early adoption of digital radio and satellite or the role that music TV now plays in introducing new music, radio's role

mixing insightful consumer research with a strong grasp of new talent and new promotional ideas.

"In Austria, the only private national service, Kronehit, found a gap in the under-39 female market for a Rhythmic-AC hybrid station crafted and programmed by Christian Schalt, who is one of the best Germanic programmers in the business."

Back at home, Dickens says, "In a few weeks' time the U.K. regulator will have to decide among 19

competitive bids to win a lucrative new license for Manchester. The applicants indicate gaps in

the market from Modern Rock to News/Talk, but surely, given all the changes in U.K. consumer behavior, the time is ripe for a format risk." [Editor's note: GCap's Xfm recently acquired the Manchester license.]

Thoughts For The Future

Dickens has a clear vision of the future for terrestrial radio. "The common thread among these international snapshots is point of difference and risks," he says. "Find your point of difference and dare to take risks. Otherwise, someone else will overtake you. Commercial radio has to continue to take risks — musical risks, promotional risks and risks with new talent.

"If ever I say, 'I have seen it all before,' I have given permission to my colleagues to shoot me."

"The pioneers of what we understand to be Top 40 radio in the U.S. thrived on a strong instinct for what the audience loved and what they were yet to know they loved. As digital music changes the world around us and stations search for the next Holy Grail format flip or promotional idea to spike their ratings, consider the value of doing something different.

"The radio business is the ultimate people business, and, as humans, we constantly evolve to create the new. Without our people, we are nothing. At the end of each broadcast day, we don't produce anything tangible — just feelings in the hearts and minds of our audience, advertisers and colleagues.

"All these feelings are created from the imagination and skill of an often-small group of people who strive each day to be different. Do you?"



in music today is clearly changing. The question is whether radio is changing with it.

"Over the last year alone, TSL in the U.K. amongst 15-24s to all radio has declined by over 10%, mainly due to MP3 players, Internet use and music TV. This alarming trend — one that is completely opposite in the Liverpool market — points to the fact that the current mixture of formats and content is failing to engage this single-minded, brand-savvy young audience.

"But the decline in TSL is not just the impact of technology, and it's not just U.S.-centric. In Europe the development of state-funded music radio has continued to pose a real challenge to the private radio sector. In the U.K. we read about early U.S. adoptions of formats like 'Jack FM' with the knowledge that BBC Radio 2 has been the Jack FM of our market for the past four or five years now.

"The incredible niche that this station [with a weekly cume of 12 million] has managed to create is largely due to its scrapping some long-standing radio ideas and formats and playing the 'real variety' card. Its current TV marketing campaign focuses on the breadth of the station's music and personalities.

"BBC Radio 2 is a successful station that plays modern rock and show tunes on the same channel, plus many more music styles under the strap line of 'Different Works.' Can you imagine a private U.S. station playing Frank Sinatra, Coldplay, Nelly and Andrew Lloyd Webber, all on the same broadcast day, and all commercial-free?"

Around the World

What is Absolute Radio International doing now outside the U.K.? "In Australia, the 'Sounds Different' tag and format position have helped establish a new kind of new-music network in the form of the Nova brand," Dickens says. "Nova came into the market in 2000, programmed by Dean Buchanan. It mixed new-music train wrecks with a lighter commercial load, plus an active and creative promotional plan.

"The station achieved 18-29 dominance in just a few years. The owner, DMG, now has the opportunity to do it all again later this year with a mixture of peak-time talk and triple A music targeting women. Watch this space.

"In Ireland, the fastest-growing radio station in the Dublin market is Q102, superbly programmed by Ian Walker. The station has increased its share by 67% in the last year by



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