

INSIDE RADIO®

Monday, June 22, 2009

“Personalities INSIDE RADIO”

Sponsored by  ASCAP

PREPAREDNESS IS CRITICAL CAVAGNARO CAVEAT

by Mike Kinoshian, Special Features Editor

Southern California hardball fans fantasize of an October Dodgers-Angels freeway series in exactly the same fashion Yankees-Mets fans do of a subway series and Cubs-White Sox partisans yearn for a cross-town expressway showdown.

Similar desires of Bay Area baseball fans eventuated into reality 20 years ago (1989). Subsequent to the Oakland A's prevailing in the first two World Series contests at the Oakland-Alameda County Coliseum, the action shifted to San Francisco's Candlestick Park. Fans were still streaming into the ballpark on October 17th at 5:04pm - when catastrophe struck in the form of the Loma Prieta earthquake. Varying reports site the trembler at 6.9 or 7.1, although in light of that intense magnitude and large metropolitan area, one would simply be quibbling.

One Heart-Stopper Follows Another

For the next 85 hours and with no commercial breaks or other interruptions, CBS Radio all-News KCBS-AM/San Francisco completely blanketed the story. “It’s a credit to our news staff that whenever something happens, they’re ready to deal with it and bring information to our listeners,” remarks Director/News & Programming *Ed Cavagnaro*. “More and more nowadays, speed is just as critical [with a story] as getting it right. People can get their news from so many different [sources]. We have to be ‘the place’ for people to go as news is happening [and] be ready to deliver it at any time.”

Several hours into KCBS-AM’s coverage though, another unfathomable situation occurred as the station suddenly went silent. “It turns out someone [prior to the quake] had cut into the fuel line for our generator which is on the roof,” Cavagnaro explains. “We’d run out of fuel much earlier than we were supposed to. One of our engineers climbed up there and got it going again. That was such a scary moment because there was this huge story and we were off the air.”

As challenging and intricate as the earthquake coverage was, it also proved to be exceptionally rewarding from a professional standpoint.

Listener outpouring regarding KCBS-AM’s wall-to-wall reportage was tremendous for a disaster that, for the most part, lasted approximately 15 seconds; claimed 65 lives; left at least 10,000 homeless; caused as much as \$13 billion in damage; and essentially shut down the Bay Area.

Atop Cavagnaro’s bookcase is an imposing binder bulging with earthquake-related letters from heartfelt listeners. “The common theme was people were scared and we comforted them,” he points out. “We gave information to let people know the world was still functioning and things were going to be okay. The word ‘comfort’ came up over and over.”

That’s unquestionably valid for all-News facilities as well as the medium in general and it reminded Cavagnaro of radio’s unique capabilities. “It’s a connection with real, live people,” he states. “I think it’s much more powerful than pictures. Radio is with people wherever they go.”

Momentous Milestone

Quite possibly, these particular statements are more applicable to KCBS-AM than to any other since earlier this month (6-11) the station celebrated its 100-year anniversary.

The event was held where it began - at the corner of San Jose’s First and San Fernando - San Jose Mayor Chuck Reed helped commemorate the centennial. Initially identified as “San Jose Calling,” the station transitioned to KQW before adopting its present KCBS-AM moniker.

Substantial ballyhoo understandably surrounds the News outlet’s milestone and a series of “Centennial Moments” is ongoing. “This [celebration] will last the rest of the year,” Cavagnaro points out. “KCBS-AM started regularly-scheduled programming in 1909 and is the world’s oldest broadcasting station. That’s pretty awesome when you think about it.”

Decorated News Staff

Two years after the Loma Prieta quake, a fire storm consumed Oakland Hills; 3,600 homes burned down and 25 people lost their lives.

Once again, KCBS-AM was front-and-center. “I’m very proud and can’t say enough about our team of reporters and anchors,” Cavagnaro magnanimously states. “They won the Peabody Award for covering the earthquake and our staff is a five-time winner of the Edward R. Murrow award for overall excellence from the Radio & TV News Directors Association.”

Mirroring what happened in countless newsrooms across the country on (Tuesday) September 11, 2001, Cavagnaro was forced

to scramble. "My wife was dropping off our daughter at school and ran into a friend of ours," he recounts. "That person's husband was an investment banker and had an office in one of the [WTC] towers."

Luckily the man was able to escape and Cavagnaro got a hold of him which resulted in a chilling half-hour 9-11 interview. "He described incredible stories of the terrible tragedy and how, as he was walking down from the 40th floor, firefighters were going up the stairs with tanks on their backs."

Patience Leads To Promotions

Sometime when Bay Area native Cavagnaro was in grammar school, he was enticed by the notion of being a reporter. "It seemed interesting to go out, meet people and cover stories," he states. "I went to Berkeley [as a dual History and Journalism major] and worked at the campus radio station [KALX] doing news and sports. When I came back home after graduating in 1974, I couldn't get a job but thought that was par for the course. I'm reminded though there was a pretty severe recession [going on then]."

With the exception of one year as a Northwestern University graduate school student, Cavagnaro has spent his entire life in the Bay Area. As part of Northwestern's graduate school program, students could elect to go the Medaille News Service in Washington (DC) - Cavagnaro opted for the radio side. "Stations in Salt Lake City, Omaha and Springfield [MO] were assigned to me and that was just tons of fun," he recalls. "We got to run around Capitol Hill with news passes and badges. I had three sets of call letters for one-quarter's worth of school work."

Three years after obtaining his Berkeley degree Cavagnaro managed to get his foot in KCBS-AM's door as a promotion assistant, eventually climbing his way to his goal of the station's newsroom.

In advance of that though, he worked at San Francisco's City Hall as an aide to a Board of Supervisors member. "I thought that was a good related position," Cavagnaro reasons. "Someone I knew at City Hall said KCBS-AM was looking [to hire]. I interviewed for [the promotion department position but] said I was interested in working in news."

Approximately 32 years later, he remains in-place at the very same station but points out several others lay claim to even longer service

time. "Reporters Barbara Taylor and Bob Melrose have been here 35 continuous years," Cavagnaro declares. "They're still going strong and are among our best reporters. It says something about the company and this station."

Really Good Numbers

Roughly coinciding with Cavagnaro's KCBS-AM arrival, cross-town KGO was beginning what would be an epic run as the market's 12+-share leader. "It has a significant news operation," he comments of the now Citadel-owned Talk outlet. "We point out we're unique because we're the all-News station and focus on doing the best we can in that [arena]. KQED is one of the strongest public stations in the country and does very well. We don't expect people will leave KGO or KQED completely - we're looking for a share of those listeners to come and [sample] us. That's happening more and more."

Whether it's by happenstance of certain events such as the historic presidential election and/or the nation's horrific economy, all-News stations seem to be performing better under PPM-based methodology versus the diary. "It just [re-enforces] all-News stations didn't get the credit they deserved," Cavagnaro opines. "We always talk about phantom cume. With all-News stations you can see it's really true. Our PPM cume numbers are very strong and real."

None of this appears to be through incidental listening. "People tune to KCBS-AM and [CBS Radio's] other all-News stations on purpose to get news and information," Cavagnaro maintains. "In addition to having a huge weekly cume, KCBS-AM is [the market's] daily cume leader. It's clear those listeners are coming to us with a purpose of getting local news and information."

Much of what an all-News station does revolves around its utility elements and Cavagnaro remarks, "We weren't as top-of-mind as some other stations which are more personality-driven. PPM [though] is showing all-News stations do better when actual listening is being measured."

April's 6+ San Francisco PPM stats showed KCBS-AM and KGO in a first-place tie (5.4) while May numbers released last week have KGO spiking to 6.3 (#1) and KCBS-AM (#2) mirroring March's 5.3; KCBS-AM is third in cume behind Entercom AC KOIT-FM and Clear Channel Hot AC "Star" (KIOI). "PPM has shown us with

• Nearly 75% of all inductees in the Songwriters Hall of Fame are ASCAP Members.
 • ASCAP Members Wrote 8 of Top 10 Hot 100 Songs*
 • ASCAP Members Wrote 8 of Top 10 Mainstream Rock Tracks*
 • Home to America's Greatest Songwriters & Composers.
 • Radio's Most Performed Repertory.
 • ASCAP Members Wrote 8 of Top 10 Modern Rock Tracks*
 • Billboard 2005 Year-End Charts

We Create Music

ASCAP
www.ascap.com

very strong 25-54 numbers [as well] which is great," Cavagnaro boasts. "Our median age is declining."

Ace Up Its Sleeve

Approximately 35 full-timers and numerous regularly-scheduled part-timers comprise KCBS-AM's Cavagnaro-overseen staff however he states it's getting more difficult to find potential employees with radio news experience. "That's not limited to on-air but writers, editors, producers and web writers. Our last fulltime hire was several years ago when a news anchor retired. Not very many people leave this station so there haven't been many fulltime openings. We're fortunate to be an excellent station [and located] in a great place to live."

Among KCBS-AM's more recognizable voices – John Madden - has been an 8:15am weekday morning fixture the past 11 years and Cavagnaro acknowledges the former Oakland Raiders head coach injects an excellent source of personality to the all-News outlet. "He's very popular and goes way back [with us]. He began doing radio after he left the Raiders in the 1970s."

Bay Area outlets (Talk) KSFO and (Sports) KNBR previously benefitted from the uniquely-colorful expertise of Madden who recently announced his departure as NBC-TV's Sunday night NFL analyst. "When there was a change in KNBR's morning show, we thought that might be [a good opportunity for us]," Cavagnaro explains. "We called John and, sure enough, he was a KCBS-AM fan. It's been a great partnership. He's fantastic to work with and adds something that really helps make our mornings shine."

Evocation of the legendary Madden naturally triggers queries about non-news elements – specifically play-by-play - on an all-news like KCBS-AM which adopted the format in 1968. "The station stayed pretty true to the all-News wheel," Cavagnaro points out. "I don't remember if it did any play-by-play in the late-1960s or early-1970s; [however] we had the 49ers for five years [1980-1985]. We also did Stanford football and some Raiders games."

Cooking and call-for-action consumer programs aired through the 1980s; however in 1991, it was decided KCBS-AM would completely honor the all-News image and Cavagnaro points out that since then, there have been no play-or-play or call-in programs. "It depends on the market," he advises. "Some CBS Radio all-News stations do very well with play-by-play. It doesn't detract from all-news especially if you carry NFL football on Sunday afternoons."

Dial into KCBS-AM Sunday morning and you'll hear Cavagnaro co-host "In Depth," a 30-minute interview program. "It's basically two-on-one," he jokes. "It works very well and is a good way to gang up on someone. Even though we have a 24/7 news wheel, we do air [several] long-form weekend news programs. We simulcast the television broadcast of [CBS-TV's] '60 Minutes' and 'Face The Nation.'"

Long ago promotion assistant Cavagnaro discovers ways to make such components fit with the station's brand. "Newsmaker of the Day," for instance, is a frequent KCBS-AM contest. "A sound bite from a newsmaker airs at 7:40am and we play it again at 4:40pm," Cavagnaro explains. "A designated caller [correctly identifying the newsmaker] wins a prize."

Big-Picture Thinking

Only a handful of General Managers have been at KCBS-AM during Cavagnaro's 32-year tenure but he's learned a considerable amount from each.

Similarly-formatted Los Angeles sibling KNX transferred General Sales Manager Ray Barnett to manage KCBS-AM and it was Barnett who promoted Cavagnaro to Director/News & Programming in 1988. "He was just very involved with everything about the station," Cavagnaro points out. "He came into the newsroom and let people know how they were doing and encouraged them. In all regards, he was a true leader. I'd say the same thing about all [the] General Managers [I've worked for] but Ray taught me not to be afraid about failing. If something doesn't go the right way, it's just an opportunity to do better. That's a lesson I've always appreciated and I learned it from him."

Following Barnett's retirement, Frank Oxarart became GM and Cavagnaro points out, "Frank taught me to always look at the big picture [rather than] getting too caught up in the details. Current GM Doug Harvill is very supportive and is great in making sure we have what we need to do the job."

Alleging he pursued management because he didn't think he was a great on-air talent, Cavagnaro declares, "You can always learn from the professionals you work with – I have through the years from our anchors, reporters, writers and editors. That's the spirit we have at KCBS-AM. We work together and learn from each other."

As chronicled here, it is obvious one can never predict emergencies. It's therefore difficult for Cavagnaro to get away although he tries to golf every week and go bicycle-riding with his wife. "There are great places to hike in this area and I like doing that, too. One good thing about being in News radio is you never really know what's going to happen. Part of what we do is being prepared for whatever happens at any time. Hopefully, we'll continue expanding our reach through different methods. I really love working in radio and especially at KCBS-AM. I can't imagine a better job than this."

WHO: Ed Cavagnaro

WHAT: Director/News & Programming

WHERE: CBS Radio All-News KCBS-AM/San Francisco

WHEN: Since 1988 (32 years at the station)