

INSIDE RADIO

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“Personalities INSIDE RADIO”

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MR. NOVAK'S EMF LESSONS

by Mike Kinosian, Personality Editor

When the parent organization of the “K-Love” and “Air 1” radio networks, decided to bump up its one-year President to CEO four months ago (early-October 2008), the likeable Northern California native in question graciously accepted the promotion but hasn't noticed a tremendous difference in his day-to-day duties.

It proved to be a case where he was essentially already performing the job and demonstrated he'd earned the title. “I come to work and do what I feel I know how to do which is to lead and empower,” remarks [Mike Novak](#) who succeeded Educational Media Foundation Broadcast Networks Founder Dick Jenkins. “Instead of a top-down, entrepreneurial-driven leader, I'm more of a bottom-up push kind of person. I get the right people involved; define their job; give them the tools to do it; and turn them loose. With that comes accountability but you don't try to tell them how to do it.”

Completely dissimilar styles are present between Novak and his predecessor but each worked toward a common purpose. “I have a wonderful relationship with him,” Novak states of Jenkins. “He is a true entrepreneur and the one who cast the vision for the last 20 years for this network's growth. He led us as we charged up the hill. I watched and learned from him while still having my own identity within the system.”

Answering The Call

A former programmer of San Diego's “B100” (KFMB-FM), Novak spent approximately 14 years in America's Finest City including ten in afternoon drive at Country KSON-FM. “We had a bible study at our house one night and someone there had a K-Love newsletter,” he recounts. “A very good friend of mine, Bob Anthony, was on the cover. He originally founded what later became K-Love. We worked together in San Francisco and after reading the newsletter, I called him.”

Halfway into the conversation between the two former co-workers, Anthony invited Novak to join him. “My wife [Ann, whom Novak met while working at KSON-FM] and I flew to Sacramento,” notes Novak who was born and raised in Modesto. “As we returned to San Diego, she asked me what I thought [about the job offer]. I had the #1 show on the #1 radio station and also had a television show.”

Such impressive credentials would certainly underscore Novak's San Diego success however he candidly - if not surprisingly - declares, “I wasn't terribly happy. After the show each day, I thought there had to be more [to my life] than what I was doing. Very calmly, my wife looked at me and said I was going [to accept the job]. She thought I was being called to it. I resigned the following Wednesday and have been here for over ten years. Everything I [previously] did in radio was ‘school’ for what I've been doing [but] it's for a whole different reason.”

Listeners subsidize EMF's approximately 275 FM stations. Some stories Novak hears from them are flat out amazing. “We don't kid ourselves – God doesn't need us but chooses to use us right now,” he comments. “We're called to a level of excellence and do it as well as we know how. There are some extremely talented people working at this network. Many of them have come through mainstream radio as I did and we are just having a ball.”

Titan Talents

Modesto Junior College Agronomy major Novak needed an elective and a friend suggested radio.

Requisite though was a choice between taking “theory” and “lab” classes and Novak opted for the latter. “Six months later, I asked the head of the department if I could make a living in radio,” he laughs. “I switched majors to Mass Communications and got my first [commercial radio job doing weekends at KYOS/Merced, CA] as a result of working at the college station.”

Coinciding with a subsequent KDON/Monterey job offer was another invitation – Novak's draft notice – but it came shortly after he was involved in a car accident and he flunked his physical. “I went to KDON and things took off from there.”

More specifically what followed was a programming assignment at (the late) Bill Drake & Gene Chenault's KYNO AM & FM/Fresno.

That in turn led to a positively prime assignment at “K100” (KIQQ/Los Angeles) in which Novak was sandwiched between

Southland radio legends Robert W. Morgan (mornings) and The Real Don Steele (afternoons). “They were just great people and I was like a kid in [a] candy store with those guys,” states then middayer Novak. “We stayed in contact and I was heartbroken when both of them passed. They were opposites of what you’d think. Robert was a little rough and Don was the nicest guy in the world. His [on-air persona] was to kick rear end and take names but that wasn’t him. It was all an act. He was so sweet off-air. I was there [about 18 months but] Los Angeles didn’t click with me. I could certainly do the job but wasn’t emotionally-prepared for [that city].”

Two weeks into a huge “K100” outdoor campaign, Novak asked the General Manager if putting up the boards had been delayed. “The metro is so stinking big that, in my life’s travels, I never saw one of them,” he points out. “That began to get into my head. It wasn’t my cup of tea [whereas] San Francisco and San Diego were both fun. Doing radio [in Los Angeles] is weird because you’re a second act to Hollywood.”

CHR Confrontation

Thus it became easy for him to depart the City of Angels for San Francisco where he worked at KFRC as APD/afternoon driver and later became Operations Manager of NBC-owned Bay Area property KYUU. “We were the first FM to beat KFRC,” Novak proudly points out. “When we did, [KFRC’s] Mark McKay walked past my secretary and kicked open my door. My heart was pounding because I thought he was going to beat me up. He shoved his hand across my desk, congratulated me and walked out.”

While at KYUU Novak had the notion of programming co-owned WNBC-AM/New York dangled in front of him. “I kind of interviewed there in the Howard Stern era,” he recounts. “I don’t know if I should have [taken the job] or not but I wasn’t drawn to it.”

Positives and negatives are involved regarding Novak no longer being involved hands-on at a particular station. “This size network certainly has its own rewards and challenges [but] you don’t get the face time with your audience,” he acknowledges. “I still do miss that. Within the last two years

though, we’ve developed ways of giving us a much more local presence in many of our markets. We’ve seen a huge payback from that [in the form of a] big rise of awareness and a huge jump in listenership.”

Possessing a natural leadership style, Novak eagerly shares his vision and is quick to adapt to change. “I love to challenge people to go further than they think they can,” he comments. “I’ve been so blessed to do what I love and was given great places [in which] to do it. We know peoples’ lives are changed because of K-Love and Air 1.”

Onboard are five fulltime pastors who interact with listeners and answer an astounding 35,000 prayer requests a month. “Many times, I’ve seen them with [one phone in each ear],” Novak explains. “We might ‘speak’ to more people, but they ‘talk’ to more. They have the stressful job and are the five hardest-working guys you’ll ever run into in your life. Good jobs come and go but good people do not. One of the coolest things the board of directors did was allow me to hire an executive coach. [Beth Bloomfield] is phenomenal and has kept me from stepping in it so many times.”

One day in particular Bloomfield wanted Novak to understand he is out of the “doing” business and in the “communication” aspect. “I now get things done through and with others,” he notes. “I’ve embraced working with people who want to bring their ‘A’ game every single day.”

Nearly Layoff-Proof

Careful not to over-Christianize on the air Novak points out EMF doesn’t even call itself a Christian radio network. “We’re just a network that plays Christian music,” he comments. “It doesn’t mean we gave up on our values. It is very clear how we are to conduct ourselves as human beings and how we treat each other. Many times, we make business decisions based on what the bible says. We do something because it’s right and not necessarily because it’s a smart business move.”

Some EMF facilities will never pay for themselves but have a quantifiable number of people being ministered to and Novak maintains, “We will not shut [those stations] off. Radio isn’t

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the bad guy here. It's what we've put – or not put – on it that has begun to shoot us in the foot. What we do is good and we have fun on the air. I spent half my life growing up in San Francisco and love that city. I was very successful there but [it] stinks in radio right now. It's awful and it's embarrassing."

Contrasted to the 44 names appearing on the employee list ten years ago, nearly 300 people are on-staff at the company's Rocklin, CA facility and Novak proudly declares, "Every one of them understands their part in it and why it's necessary. I'm big on being transparent with the staff and sharing my thoughts with them. I have just as many flaws as anyone else but I know why I'm supposed to be doing this."

If EMF were ever to be negatively impacted, an adamant Novak stresses he'd do everything possible before he'd let one person go. "I would sell stations before I'd fire people," he asserts. "What else do I have except people and their God-given talent? We hire people who fit into our culture. There is like-mindedness here that Jesus Christ is our Lord and Savior."

Selling stations doesn't seem to be on the horizon for the network which expanded about 16% a year. "That's slowed down a little only because we've become pickier buyers," Novak remarks. "When the price is right we still acquire properties. It's not our money [so] we're very judicious with it. We've become much better at analyzing markets. The gospel is absolutely free – getting it to [listeners] is not. We have to be concerned about a facility's operating cost."

Twice a week Novak meets with his executive council consisting of the CFO, Chief Programming Officer and Chief Technology Officer. "I keep my eye on them to make sure we're doing what the audience wants us to do and have the infrastructure to make it work. There's also a 'Leadership Team' made up of other Vice Presidents throughout the organization. They meet weekly but I typically do not go to those meetings. The watchword is to always be efficient because we use donor dollars. It is just as important we be effective. Otherwise, we aren't being good stewards of this money."

Biking, Boxing & Being Benevolent

Currently in the process of joining a Sacramento-area Christian motorcycle group, Novak undeniably enjoys riding his Harley. "It doesn't mean anything other than it's a bunch of guys who happen to believe in the Lord and ride bikes," he convincingly comments. "We go with every other Harley group and are welcomed with open arms. I'm into a lot of physical stuff and play softball, tennis and just started taking boxing training. I have no business doing it but the training is fascinating. My wife is a marathon runner and I am the assigned water and snack person."

Travel is a major activity and the couple has been to Africa,

Bangladesh, Belize, China, Guatemala, Peru and Thailand – all on mission trips. "My wife and I were never the same after our first [of four] trips to Africa," Novak remarks. "Even in today's economy, you realize how blessed you really are. [Ann] and I have done many mission trips for [Scottsdale, AZ-based] Food for the Hungry."

As the world opens up so does EMF's stage and Novak insists, terrestrial radio isn't going away. "It may just get repurposed," he opines. "A radio station [someday] could be [anything from] a recording studio, a coffee house, a church or a community center. I can listen to Air 1 on my iPhone."

Intensity level of his staff's work remains the same whether there are ten stations in the network or 10,000. "We're going to do the best we can no matter what," Novak declares. "The programming department is the last to find out if we ever [add] stations. We don't tell them because it doesn't matter. Radio used to be a one-way conversation. 'We' spoke and 'they' listened. It's becoming much more lopsided where 'they' speak more and 'we' listen more. We're working on ways of providing content we feel we need to provide with the integrity we have built-in but users define how it comes out. All this is new frontier to us and that's where EMF is going to go."

Listeners constantly tell Novak radio is the most convenient thing they have yet he explains, "They don't use it because there's nothing on it they want. That's our fault - so let's change it. I knew I was supposed to do this but didn't fully know why. I will [keep] doing it [for] as long as God wants me to. It will be very clear to me and then I'll listen to what He has to say."



WHO: Mike Novak

WHAT: CEO

WHERE: Educational Media Foundation

HOW LONG: Since October 2008

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