



MICHAEL OWENS

Building A Dynasty In The Desert



Even if his father, Buck, had never gone into radio ownership (his investment counselors tried to talk him out of it), Michael Owens was destined to be a broadcaster. His management skills in Bakersfield set the stage for one of radio's greatest success stories. Under Michael's leadership as VP/GM of Owens Broadcasting and with an all-star team, KNIX/Phoenix was not only a perennial, award-winning market leader, it was a national trendsetter in branding, integrated marketing, promotion and community service. Its renowned commitment to its staff centered around business principles

of "doing it right." That spawned an ancillary network, magazine, TV show and more stations before consolidation finally led to divestiture in 1999.



When I was six or seven years old, I used to go to sleep with a little transistor radio and always wait for the contest on KAFY/Bakersfield so I could call up and win a six-pack of 45s. But whenever we went down to the station to pick up our prize, it was always songs that you'd never heard of that they were giving away. But just being there was always of keen interest to me and I loved the music. Interestingly, KAFY, now KUZZ-AM, is now owned by our family and is run by my cousin, Mel Owens.

different jobs at the station as they came open – everything except accounting. And that rounded me out in terms of how to make a product that people like to listen to. Since I had no musical talent to write or sing or perform, radio is what I gravitated to. It was just like, "Gee whiz, I get to do this and I get paid, too?" It was always just a real passion.

be good and produce listeners. Otherwise, this sales job isn't very much fun." When it was first purchased, KUZZ was a daytimer and didn't have ratings. When we got the FM [rocker KKXX] to go along with it, FM was just starting to catch on. But you're selling spots for ten bucks. You had to sell a lot of those, and about 30-40% of those that you sold never paid, so it was not that easy.

also recognized mistakes the big companies made. I knew if we sincerely cared about the employees, the working conditions, their pay and their families, that we would win this thing. Vendors wanted to be a part of it, and our competitors wanted to be hired by us. It made us very human, and because we weren't a big corporation, we could move quickly and adjust to different market conditions.

“ LOOK, YOU GUYS GET US A 20 SHARE 25-54 AND WE'LL BUILD A SWIMMING POOL. ”

My first radio job was as janitor at KUZZ-AM in the summer when I was 15. Dad had just purchased the radio station, and I went in three times a week to clean up. I'd watch the personalities while they were on the air, and fell in love with the whole feel of being inside.

What I loved best was the creative aspect of putting together the product: the songs, the contests, the promotions – taking that sound and the ratings it made and getting into local sales and national sales. But it was always, "The product's gotta

While working as GM of KUZZ and KKXX, I was given the opportunity to oversee our new Phoenix Country stations KTUF and KNIX as a company VP. I started going over there regularly, and Larry Daniels was there as PD. At the end of 1977, I met with Larry, who by now had gone through three GMs, and we had been sending money every month to cover payroll and expenses. Being so passionate about radio, he was despondent that we weren't making any progress and told me he had an offer to go to a competitor. I said, "No, Larry, don't do that. I'm going to come over here and run the stations." I had no idea I was going to do that; I'd just said it. But it also was just something I felt. I told Dad that it seemed like the right career move for me. Dad and I were very good friends and he probably thought, "Well, he'll come back here in a few months with his tail between his legs and we'll be doing things together again."

What I was able to do was surround myself with all these talented people and to give them the tools to do their jobs, and really expose their talent and ability. I just benefited from all that.

In the mid-'80s, everything was on a roll. I always challenged the staff, and said, "Look, you guys get us a 20 share 25-54 and we'll build a swimming pool." Well, guess what? Two ratings periods later, we had a 22 share. But the insurance company said we couldn't do that, so we built a gym and brought in a fitness trainer. It was a great facility. We always felt if we could get them inside the building, we had a chance to close the deal, to win 'em over or to hire them.

Bob Podolsky, who was my GSM for about 22 years in Phoenix, was a real marketing genius in terms of marketing the station to the advertiser. I began taking him with Larry to CRS so he could get a feel for what was out there in the product line and he could use those ideas. He was really a partner, and I give him a lot of credit.

Selling was probably the toughest thing I've ever done. We sold KNIX, KESZ, the satellite network – everything. But I could see that we'd have to get several more stations in the marketplace to remain winners and that we'd have to go pretty far in debt. Quite frankly, it wasn't something Dad was willing to do, either. Financially, selling was a big reward, but personally a real tragedy to me. I didn't want it to happen, but realized it had to.

Being inducted is really a treasured honor. I lost both Mom and Dad in 2006, and I think it'd be something they'd be extremely proud of. I wish they were here to see it. I was so happy when it happened for W. Steven Martin, our morning man for so many years, and I was thrilled beyond belief when Larry was inducted last year. It was almost like I was being inducted because we had done everything together. I can't begin to tell you what that meant to me.

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March Of The Penguins: KNIX/Phoenix won the ACM Country Station of the Year in 1986, 1987, 1992 and 1993. Garth Brooks (center) stopped backstage to congratulate the happy tuxedo team of (l-r) MD Buddy Owens, GSM Bob Podolsky, VP/GM Michael Owens and PD Larry Daniels. Can you guess the year?

Dream Team: At the 1992 Phoenix Open Pro-Am, KNIX VP/GM Michael Owens offers some swing tips to Ping founder Karsten Solheim, Vince Gill, Buck Owens, KNIX MD Buddy Owens, KUZZ GM Mel Owens and Glen Campbell.

