

# JAN JEFFRIES

## Gold-Standard Radio

**Cumulus Media Sr. VP/Programming Jan Jeffries oversees 372 stations across several formats and is hands-on with 51 properties, including Country KPLX (The Wolf)/Dallas, WFMS/Indianapolis and WSM-FM/Nashville. Prior to joining the company 12 years ago, Jeffries spent almost 30 years as a highly regarded major market personality and programmer in Chicago, Atlanta, Tampa and Baltimore, among other markets. Jeffries was Cumulus' Format Dir./Pop in June 2005 when he was promoted to Sr. Format Dir./Pop, rising to VP/Programming in June 2006 and SVP/Programming in April 2007.**

**What is your role as Cumulus' top programmer?**

It's my job to make sure all Cumulus stations are executing the strategy daily. My responsibilities include all formats: Country, Top 40, Rhythmic Top 40, Hot AC, Mainstream AC, AAA, Rock, Urban AC and Mainstream Urban. We have very talented VPs and Format Directors in Atlanta who are trusted implicitly with programming and music decisions on a daily basis. They are the best in the business and work in tandem with some of America's great PDs at our Cumulus properties. For sake of discussion and assurance of maintaining pinpoint focus, the VPs and I discuss and sign off on the weekly music lists and rotation updates prior to presenting them to our PDs for discussion. It's a check-and-balance system within the centralized culture of the company.

The music is the fun element of programming. The most gratifying element is developing new air talent and growing veteran talent. I have long maintained a keen interest in authoring and presenting the Morning Show War College on a regular basis to our talent throughout the company across the formats. It focuses on personality development, case histories, disclosure of a morning show's Q score, strengths and vulnerabilities and listener expectations, among other proprietary difference makers. CEO/President Lew Dickey and COO John Dickey set the Cumulus gold standard and raise the bar consistently, providing us with the tools we need to differentiate with excellence in our markets. The proof is exhibited in our ratings across the formats and markets.

**How many stations do you personally oversee?**

I keep a finger on the pulse and direction of 372 properties and am personally hands-on with 51 stations. The majority of those 51 are made up of CHR, Rhythmic CHR and AC. Among the Country stations, I work directly with WFMS/Indianapolis, WSM-FM/Nashville and, of course, my pride and joy, KPLX (The Wolf), where I temporarily moved my Atlanta corporate office to Dallas for almost a year, doing double duty as the Wolf's PD. The special place in my heart for The Wolf in Dallas is due to victory over naysayers, that a CHR guy could not drive in

prep requirements and presentation. We also changed out the kitchen sink! KPLX remains No. 1 25-54 Adults, 6+ and 12+. It is closely watched and guided as one of our major company achievements operating on the Cumulus gold-standard of executing strategy.

**With so many stations, how do you manage your time in order to attend to every one?**

As with all our corporate programmers, we have hopefully developed skills not only as master strategists, but equally as important, as masters at time management and at prioritizing the attack list. Being organized and loving what you do is a great contributor to achieving the art of relatively stress-free productivity. A checklist of consistently changing priorities daily is advised. The late, legendary broadcaster Jay Cook told me years ago that each evening just before leaving the station he would make a priority list of things to attack the next morning. I still do it daily.

**Earlier you said that part of your job is to make sure people follow the strategy. What is the strategy? How much of a station strategy is local, and how much is a national overview of the way a particular format should be executed?**

A little background first: Most of our markets have individual market research, and it's not research that's farmed out. Lew and John Dickey ran Stratford Research, a formidable consulting company based on *research*, not on campfire stories by PDs who became consultants (and I know because I used to be one of them!) telling what worked somewhere else, saying, "We're going to put it in, and it's gonna work *here*, too." Sometimes we were right, sometimes we were not. Stratford, on the other hand, would research a market, and then, in common radio terms instead of research lingo, present the executive summary of what needed to be done. When Lew became President of Cumulus, he promoted me to President of Stratford Research. That was the beginning of me really finding out that a PD without a very accurate map of what needs to be done can end up being a music director on steroids; that is, [thinking] it's just all about the music. But it's *not* just all about the music, because several stations in your market have the same songs

to read the market, listen for the differentiation, listen for the superlatives, use the tools they have and use the information to turn their stations into winners. For instance, fixing KPLX was not that hard. We changed every single thing, and people were looking at me like, "Jan, what is going on?" And I said, "The research points [out] that we need to do things a little differently. Voila! We followed the strategy. Prior to me taking the KPLX PD reins, the station was not really following the strategy. They were doing things that they thought, as radio people, were right, but the whole thing is doing what the *audience* wants you to do, not what we want.

**What are your overall thoughts on the state of Country radio today?**

It's growing in appeal across the masses with the influx of new and very talented artists. The big winner is Country radio. It's a pleasure to listen to a well-programmed

radio is great radio, regardless of format. Yes, we made distinctive musical changes at KPLX that helped catapult it back into the game. However, there was one major initiative across the dayparts that helped make a difference. The difference came from every day – yes, *every day* – meetings with the morning show and several times a week with the personalities in middays, PM drive and nights. I knew the good winds of change were blowing when the morning show would hang around past noon some days to voluntarily meet about today's and tomorrow's show.

There are many basics that work for both Country and pop. In the "not so good" column, the one thing I picked up on, as opposed to pop radio, Country listeners are not quick to accept crossover songs from rock and pop. While Darius Rucker comes from pop, he has more than successfully shown his love for country music and the fans. In my opinion, Darius and his writing partners are prolific writers, and he is simply a great artist delivering on expectations to country fans.



Country station that achieves a perfect music balance of country greats like George Strait, Alan Jackson and Brooks & Dunn with fresh new talent like Lady Antebellum, Taylor Swift, Carrie Underwood and Jason Aldean, among others. Country radio is the only radio format that legitimately and successfully mixes the heritage artists with new artists. CHR, AC, Rock and Urban stations struggle to make it work.

**I'm always curious to talk to programmers with long histories in other formats about their impressions of Nashville, the way Country music is and how it works – especially the relationships between the labels and Country radio. How have you found it to be different or similar to the pop world? Any surprises?**

No surprises, just variations of the same thing. The pop world has some great SVPs and VPs

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to Dallas and turn it around. Turn it around we did, from worst to first – No. 13 to No. 1 – before I returned to Atlanta.

We changed everything at KPLX, ranging from a complete reload of the morning show, midday talent, PM drive and night talent, imaging voice-over, music library, current rotations, slogan, logo and a deliberate retooling of talent show

you have. The strategy comes from the studies and it's about the nuances – things not always obvious to the listener or the competition. The nuances are what you're really paying for, and they really make the difference.

The research yields a road map that turns MDs on steroids into strategists. And then, hopefully, with corporate help, they become master strategists. At that point, they are able

**You've had a long career in Top 40. What differences and similarities are there in other formats where you have spent most of your career? Are there some things in Top 40 radio formats that don't work in Country radio?**

The one commonality that allows a historically pop programmer like myself to spread his wings and grow in other formats is that great

who do a great job of serving their artists, first and foremost, and their labels, and who also work well with broadcasters. It's the same thing in Country, although things here seem a little bit more closely knit, if you will, between the labels and the people who work with each other. Label people have strong opinions. Maybe the opinions aren't any stronger than the pop side, but the Country label folks seem

to be a little bit more verbal. They'll tell you right to your face what they think about what you're doing. And you know what? That's absolutely fine. I would almost prefer that.

One of my strengths in fixing KPLX was that I wasn't biased about the format or the expectations. I had no sense of how the Nashville labels worked. I understand it is a game, I totally get it, and I've learned to work with it. I won't always agree with it, but there are some great people in Nashville who have reached out and have helped us come up with some really good ideas for our radio stations. And there's not any problem with Nashville and Dallas, believe me.

**Do you have an overall programming philosophy?**

I love this question because it reminds me of the majority of resumes that I receive including the applicant's "programming philosophy." I have never read anyone's predetermined, programming philosophy. The best programming philosophy is to execute the station's strategy with attention to fine details. It varies widely from market to market and station to station, making it impossible for a one-size-fits-all philosophy.

**Focusing on Cumulus' Country stations, is there an overall programming philosophy for them?**

Each station has a personality and listener expectation unique to its market. There is not a general philosophy for all of our Country stations. We strive to deliver a "local" radio station in music preferences, talent content

**sets are you looking for that you might not have looked for 5-10 years ago?**

We look for team players who are capable and willing to embrace the culture of our company. We are centralized, with programming experts contributing 24/7 back to our markets. On the flip side, we have brilliant PDs providing great ideas and feedback. The successful candidate for a Cumulus PD post is ideally multi-faceted and multi-tasking as well as multi-talented. We hire people who have the drive and desire to become master strategists.

**KPLX and KKGO/Los Angeles go back and forth for the title as Country's No. 1-cuming station. Obviously, you've learned a few things about PPM.**

It is nice to have bragging rights. However, the big achievement is conversion of over a million come to healthy ATE (Average Time Exposed) and ultimately share percentage. We do the same thing with over a million come with our CHRs in Atlanta and Houston. We have learned that PPM does not always favor the incumbent or the "in" station at the moment. PPM gives credit for actual listening. What a concept! It is also unforgiving to less than gold-standard programming.

**You've referred to the Cumulus "gold-standard" a number of times. What exactly do you mean by that?**

It's staying on target, following and embellishing the plan, polishing the stone every single day. If we do that, these stations grow. It's amazing; it's like magic. When you're not doing gold-standard work, you're

that I've got that makes it a sensational promotion, contest, new format clock or whatever. It's all about working together.

This is truly a team effort. When people talk about us being very hands-on with our PDs, there's one thing that seems to be forgotten. When Cumulus was started, it acquired a lot of small- and medium-market radio stations that were mom-and-pop shops operating on a certain level that worked for them, and it was fine. We were mostly major-market people. That's not any better than being in any other size market, but you are exposed to a different level of doing things. So we would implement things and would try to teach people. Those who wanted to learn, flourished. And those who didn't, left – they quit or whatever.

So we were the big, bad wolf, because the perception was we came in and changed the party. But that's not what we did. We improved what they were doing and helped them grow. We didn't see anything wrong with that. So, are we hands-on? Yes. Is it one-size-fits-all? No. We encourage input from our PDs because we want them to have a sense of ownership. At the same time, my responsibility is making sure that each of our stations is absolutely optimized. And sometimes that requires change or modification.

PDs have the absolute freedom to call me and say, "Jan, as you know from our market study, this station leans a particular way. And this record flies in the face of the strategy that we're adding across the board. What if I wait on that one and put in this other song that's on the discussion list? Maybe we add it a week early because we're probably going to add it anyway, right?" And I'll say, "You know what? You're right. Do it. Good thinking." It is *not*,

their own through the Internet, and get ideas and expand their thinking. People who do that make the company stronger.

**What are some of the misconceptions people have about you? About Cumulus?**

I do not know of any specific misconceptions. However, I am sure there are some, as there are with any successful company that strives for excellence and will not settle for anything less. It is a company started by two broadcasters, Lew and John Dickey, who work to achieve excellence and expect their key people to do likewise and make a difference every day. The gold-standard of Cumulus is trumped only by the interpersonal skills and caring for its valued employees by our executive leaders.

**Who have been your mentors, and why? What's some of the best advice you've ever been given?**

First and foremost, my dad was the most influential person and my mentor no matter what career path I took. He passed away in '95. But he was the man. His work ethic was second to none, driven for perfection and always caring for those around him. The things he loved more than his career were my mom, my sister and me and his faith in God. The best advice from my dad was to be myself and do my best in all that I do.

**I'd still like to know who you consider as your radio heroes.**

In the '80s, it was John Gehron while we were at WLS/Chicago and Jay Cook during his programming years at WFIL/Philadelphia



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presentation and imaging. That is achieved by the PD and staff knowing their market better than anyone and relating to it through every programming element.

**How much autonomy is granted local PDs with music, promotions and talent hiring and firings?**

Each week we listen to new product. If we believe a new release is a hit, we play it. It's really that simple. Our PDs may call me anytime and request a change of rotation or add to the playlist if it is for the improvement of the station and comes with valid reasoning. Promotions and contests are largely dependent on our PDs and promotion directors. Once the specifics are determined, we discuss it in detail with the intent of maximizing the promotion to the fullest using our resources in Atlanta.

With regards to hiring and firing, the PD will discuss the need for the personnel change. If everything is in order, the PD follows through. We help our PDs place talent through the Cumulus Talent Bench. We also like to promote from within the company.

**What's your process and criteria for recruiting PDs and air talent? What skill**

off target and not operating at the level we expect of our PDs. I think I can speak for Lew and John in saying that they expect all of us, every day, to come in and enjoy our job. We're all in this business because we love it. So love it and enjoy it. At the same time – not "however" or "but" – we want people to reach a new level, set the bar high, achieve that bar and raise the bar again. That's the gold-standard.

**You've also mentioned Cumulus' "centralized culture" a couple of times. Can you give me a deeper feel for what exactly that means?**

People have this misconception of Cumulus as one-size-fits-all. That's the farthest thing from the truth because of our research and our individualism of each radio station.

We're centralized from the standpoint that things come through Atlanta. But what's wrong with that? We're able to put the icing and the cherry on top of good ideas. If someone has a good idea for a promotion, I may have something that would make that absolutely, over-the-top the best promotion they've done in a long time. And I've just been saving it to tack it onto something. It's the unity of their idea with something

"Here's the list."

When we hire PDs – and it's probably true of other department heads, too – we ask that we not get surprised, because we will not surprise them. We look for input from our PDs because it's a two-way street. And, we have a lot to offer them. It's amazing how people come in and think – just like I did when I joined the company – "I am *really* good at this." You learn real fast that you are pretty good at some things, but there are so many good things to learn based on the gold-standard – and I say this in complete sincerity – that is set by Lew and John Dickey. It spreads throughout the company to those who want to learn and grow in their career.

We look for input from our PDs because you know what it does? It makes me better. And it continually grows not only my knowledge and my overview, but it increases my enthusiasm knowing that I, too, continue to grow, and that's what it's all about. It also lets me know that my guys and gals out there are working and thinking, not just scheduling music, putting out fires, going to meetings and doing the weekend schedule. They are hopefully learning through example. And we ask them to prioritize their time, look at the day and week, to take time to listen to the market and to markets outside of

and overseeing KIIS/Los Angeles. From the mid-'90s to now, it's John Dickey. He's had the biggest influence on me, my knowledge of this business and my ability to execute it, and I think we execute it as well, if not better, than everybody else out there. It ain't bragging when you can back it up with numbers, right? But I owe it to him. I've worked for some fabulous broadcasters in Baltimore, Chicago, Washington, Tampa, Atlanta and on the West coast. But if I had to say who really got me into being smart and operating on that kind of level and being a strategist – a master strategist – it would be John Dickey and John Dickey alone.

**What has been the effect of the economy on your day-to-day business?**

Like most businesses, Cumulus has been affected by the downturn. We have cut back on part-time hours and have added extra responsibilities to our PDs and OMs as a means to maintaining quality with fewer people. Better days are ahead. The company mission statement for Cumulus is to be "the best-run radio company in the world." We persevere daily to validate that statement. Cumulus will get through this storm standing tall. **CAC**