

# JOHN DIMICK

## Programming At The Fore

**N**ewly-minted Lincoln Financial Media Sr. VP/Programming & Operations John Dimick is no stranger to Country, having programmed KQOL/Salt Lake City in the early '90s and KSON/San Diego from 1998-2004. Book-ending his time in San Diego were programming stints at Top 40 WNCI/Columbus and Top 40/Rhythmic WQHT/New York. Along the way, he programmed AC, Hot AC and Oldies as well, perhaps perfectly grooming him for his present role of overseeing 14 stations with a wide variety of formats in Atlanta, Denver, Miami and San Diego. LFM's holdings include two of this format's top outlets, KSON and KYGO/Denver. Dimick joined LFM as VP/Programming & Ops in March 2007 and was elevated to Sr. VP last month.

**CA: What's your role as Lincoln Financial Media's top radio programmer?**

**JD:** We've always believed we need to be best in show or best in breed. My job is to help our stations with everything they need to get there, whether it's on the air, interactive, digital or PPM strategies. That involves working with all our GMs, PDs, sales managers, interactive managers and webmasters to develop the best products we can.

**What's your interaction with the sales departments?**

Helping create ideas; helping sales better understand the products that we have and how they can best be matched to advertiser's needs. And to explain how the products we develop over the air attract listeners. We make money by selling an audience, so it's helping sales understand how we move an audience from point A to point B.

There's not a hard line in this company between programming and sales. If programming people can understand the objectives of our clients and our sales department, and if sales can understand the objectives of our programming department, everybody wins. There's a lot of money to be made when there's greater understanding and communication between sales and programming.

**Throughout your career you've worked with some of radio's best operators, including Nationwide, Jefferson-Pilot and Emmis. What qualities do they share?**

Considering how lucky I've been, you'd think I'd be buying lottery tickets. But those companies, and LFM, understand that this is a business of people. In a \$100 million radio station, you have \$3 million in equipment and \$97 million in people. That's what those companies get more than most. And they are led by patient people who understand that things don't get done in a day. They're not infinitely patient; but they're patient. Those are the type of people I want to work for.

**What is the operational philosophy between LFM's Atlanta headquarters and each of the clusters?**

Because we're small, we're able to develop much better relationships with each of our individual radio stations and clusters. We view ourselves as "customer service" – we're here to provide help and assistance. Each cluster and station knows what the goals and objectives are, they know best how to get from A to B. If you interviewed all the key players inside each cluster, I'd hope they would say we help them get where they need to go.

We don't get into their responsibilities on a granular level. We tell them what we expect them to do each year, and let them go do it. And they are to let us know if something doesn't work the way it's supposed to, or if they find something cool we can share with others. Sometimes that evil corporate guidance comes into play where we have to say, "Sorry, can't do that." Mainly, though, our job is to provide a comprehensive business unit for our parent company.

**Even though LFM is a relatively small broadcast company, you oversee a rather wide array of formats.**

Among our group we have three sports stations, two Country, a Soft AC, a Classic Hits, a couple ACs and an Alternative. We've geographically and formatically diversified. I like being formatically diverse. Not all formats are strong at the same time;

the music in each format isn't always great at the same time. So being diverse is a stabilizing factor for the company.

The good news is, I don't have to worry about knowing the intricacies of all those formats. It all starts at the top with CEO Don Benson's challenge to me, and the company's challenge to itself: Go out and hire great people. When you find great PDs, you hire them, let them do their jobs – we operate under "Your bat, your ball, your butt" – keep them happy and keep them in the company. So, I don't have to know everything about every format, which gives me time to investigate PPM and to find things that are working that we can share around the company.

**LFM has two of the most prominent and heritage Country stations in the nation in KSON and KYGO. What are your overall thoughts on the state of Country radio today?**

Looking at the big picture metrics that I deal with, Country today has this young-end swell that I haven't seen in a very long time. I'm not sure we've ever seen the 18-34 numbers we're currently seeing in San Diego and Denver. Country is enjoying an unbelievable swell. I see Zac Brown Band on the Today Show, Brad Paisley meeting with the Ambassador to France – that's crazy.

Our Country stations have always been good performers, but they're now performing at even higher levels. One of the things I've always admired about the format is the relationship between the artists and the radio stations. That makes the high tides higher and the downtrends not quite so bad.

**Your AC stations are playing a handful of Country hits. In fact, I noticed thatWSTR (Star 94)/Atlanta is playing The Band Perry's "If I Die Young" in heavy. Is it good or bad for Country radio when AC plays a bunch of its hits and acts?**

In some ways it's good for Country to have other formats expose its music to other groups of listeners who might not otherwise hear it. At times it may not be so good because the casual listener who wants a little bit of Country will get what they want on their favorite AC station and not have to go to the Country station to get it. But there's also a side benefit as the music tends to swing away from the center. At its extremes, Country tends to build its core audience a bit more when ACs, Hot ACs and Top 40 start swinging away from a country sound. People will miss that and seek it out. A lot of it has to do with the way Country stations are tweaking their product and taking care of their core, while not worrying about their cume. Stations must be careful to not violate the expectations of their core while trying to please their cume.

**LFM's stations are all in PPM markets. What's your sense of PPM and Country?**

Any station that can be readily identified by the music it plays has a distinct advantage. The music you play defines who you are, which gives Country a built-in advantage. If a listener hears a Train song, they could be on any number of stations. When you hear the vast majority of artists exclusive to Country radio, the listener knows exactly where they are.





ratings may tell us when we have a brand problem. But we never, ever, ever, ever, ever, ever, ever use ratings as research. The sample size is just too low. Using PPM to program your music is like having 15 people participate in your next auditorium music test. Because that's how many meters you have listening to your radio station that you are using to make a music adjustment.

Arbitron is designed to, and does a good job of, generating ratings information. They are not a research company; that's not what they are designed to be. This is not at all meant to be disrespectful to Arbitron. They look at data. There are plenty enough data points to use for ratings. But there just aren't enough data points to use it as research.

I understand that I'm fortunate to work for the company I work for. We're not the biggest company in the world, but Bank of America or Wells Fargo or a private equity company is not knocking on my door saying if you don't make your payment we're going to take your stations away. Not a day goes by that I don't remember that. We get to spend money on focus groups, on perceptuals and weekly call-out. I don't know how long that's going to last; I hope it lasts forever.

And I don't want to sound like there is only one way to do things or that our way is the right way. There are different situations in different circumstances. I'm sure every broadcast owner in America would like to do more for their individual properties. I'm sure we would too. Hell, I'd love to have a million dollar campaign for each of our stations, but it's not realistic. But research is where this industry has taken it off the rails.

**In his quote about your recent promotion, LFM President/CEO Don Benson said, "With the new title comes more responsibility for 'developing interactive and ratings strategies.'" We've talked PPM; what interactive strategies are you working on?**

That said, radio stations in general could all do a better job moving things beyond the music. Music is one of the most difficult things to get right on a radio station, but it's also the easiest thing to duplicate. It's the thing that is least unique about any radio station in the country. I can track what you play and put the same songs on the air.

Country music can really help Country stations define and build that brand, but even they have to ask, "What is that thing that puts them beyond the music? What is that thing that someone's favorite Country station has that Pandora doesn't quite have? What is that thing that speaks directly to the listener in your city that satellite radio just can't do when it comes to connecting listeners with the community?" Each programmer must find what they do that separates their station from that automated or voice-tracked station across the street that's playing the same music.

**That sounds great, but today's conventional wisdom is that PPM doesn't like all those things you say stations should be doing between the songs.**

They're wrong. And we don't program our stations that way. Everyone certainly has their own philosophies. But instead of just assuming that what some people are saying about PPM is correct, I encourage people to find out the truth on their own. I believe making your station void of personality is wrong. It's certainly not what we do or how we choose to engage our listener.

Now, are we running three-minute promotional spots or are the jocks talking for five minutes without a bed in between songs? No. We've certainly clean-up our content. But we want to engage the audience, and when your audience is engaged they hear the commercials that you play.

Like everyone else, we're digging hard into social networking and social media and trying to figure out how people actually use our digital products, be it texting or engaging via our websites.

A lot of our growth in the interactive space has been organic. We've watched as Star 94 has developed a core of about 1,200 listeners who actually talk to one another on Facebook and help each other try to win contests. Direct Marketing Results has helped us put that all together. So, part of my new responsibilities are to see what's being done and how, in and out of our company, and figure how to share and make them work for our other stations.

One of the things I have to look at is where we can expect these ideas to work – and where they won't work. For instance, is it realistic to expect our Denver Oldies station to drive our social media strategy? It may not be a leader, but the challenge is figuring out what to do based on what we've learned.

**So much of this is adapting strategies based on a station's audience and the way listeners are using these new tools.**

It's become kind of a joke, but I'm not even sure we need phone lines at some stations anymore. Especially at 18-34 targeted stations where they just text, text, text. Part of the strategy there must be to let the jocks respond with texts. It's funny, I heard someone say they don't let jocks text, it distracts them and they're not focused on what's going on in the studio. But that same PD wouldn't have been angry watching a jock work the phones. Either way, they're doing their jobs. It's just engaging the listeners on the platform they prefer.

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And they go out and buy the products. Newsflash: That's what we're supposed to do.

We're charging people a lot of money to move our audience from their home or car to the client's store. And I don't think you do that by dead-seguing into stop sets. You violate your listener's core expectations if you do that.

**How has PPM changed the programmer's role?**

It's changed our job a lot and shined the spotlight more on what we do. And maybe even removed a little of the mystique and mystery from what we do. We always relied on scaring the hell out of the sales-focused GM who didn't know what we did "back there." It's far more collaborative today. We're all in the middle of this, together. In fact, the program director has had his job enhanced and elevated inside the building by PPM.

I'm excited about PPM. It has its pluses and minuses, just like the diary does, but PPM has brought programming back to the forefront. The diary was marketing. If you had a good product and marketed the hell out of it, you won. That doesn't work in PPM. You have to have a great product *and* tell people about it, or you don't win. And that great product is programming; it's what we do. PPM is a measure of how people consume your product. It's not what you can get them to *think* they did; it's a matter of how they used your radio station.

**There's far more information available to programmers today than ever before. How do you handle the flood of data?**

First, we don't pay much attention to weeklies. In fact, we use them for "what doesn't belong." If one of our stations surges ahead, or a competitor surges ahead, we just discount it.

But here is where our philosophy begins to diverge from others in the industry. To us, PPM is not research. PPM is ratings. And there is a fundamental difference. We don't use PPM data to help guide the direction of our radio stations. We don't use PPM data for song selection or promo placement or anything else like that. We use actual audience research to do that. We hire research companies to help us understand what's good and how listeners are viewing our brands. The

**How important are radio station websites?**

We need to continue to fine-tune them. It's important to understand that the cume doesn't go to our websites, only the core. That means we need to focus more on what we know our core listener wants from us. We need to understand we don't play on the big field. You could take all of our websites over the course of an entire year and all our pages added together don't come close to the power of Google. So even trying to play on that platform is like peeing on a forest fire. We've come a long way, but have a long way to go.

**Given the huge number of content platforms available to listeners today, where do radio stations fit into consumer's lives as a content provider?**

Funny you should ask that. I am sitting in a hotel room in San Diego watching CNN and Hurricane Irene coming up the coast. And I'm wondering how many news updates Pandora is running right now. Or if Sirius XM is telling people where the Red Cross shelters are.

I've never thought of radio as a national platform. I've always seen it as a local platform. We're every person's medium. We're not an early adopters medium, and we get in trouble when we try to be. And after Irene is over, you watch the number of radio stations and their listeners who come to the rescue. And then tell me how much water Pandora delivers to folks on the East Coast whose water systems are shut down.

**You're obviously bullish on radio.**

I love radio; I wouldn't want to do anything else. It's ours to screw up. We have the capacity to put 55,000 people into a football stadium to see a singer. We do Country Fest in San Diego where people can touch the artists. We do a summer jam in Denver which sells out in minutes and 20,000 people get to see their favorite artists under the stars. We touch people. We move people. That's what local radio does better than anybody. As long as we keep doing that, and as long as we do *more* of that while not trying to be something we're not, we'll be in great shape.

**CAC**