Sandler's Passion Brings Her Back To Radio

By her own admission, there aren't a lot of other places where Nicole Sandler could have ended up. A 28-year radio veteran, Sandler was concentrating on her production and voice-over company, Virtual Radio Services, when she was named director of programming at Northeast Broadcasting in March. "One of the reasons I got out of radio was because the kind of work I was doing just wasn't very specialized," she says. "I could do other radio, and have, but my heart is really in triple-A. It's a niche format, and there aren't that many stations. The ones that are there, in this era of consolidation, are more and more voice-tracked, there's fewer people, it's less creative, and more business (driven). That's not necessarily a bad thing, it's just the way the industry has gone. There's fewer sales and fewer opportunities to do the kind of radio I know and love."

Northeast owns 12 stations, including suburban Boston's WXRV (The River) Haverhill, Mass. and WNCS (the Poin) Burlington, Vt. Northeast's Stephen Silberberg and consultant Keith Cunningham, Sandler's former boss at triple-A KACD Los Angeles, had taken the River 0.8 t 1. Sandler says that Silberberg "realized to continue to make progress, he needed somebody in-house with a programming background to [infuse] a new perspective and some new ideas."

After KACD, "I did the small-market thing" in Taos [N.M., where she programmed triple-A KTAO] and realized that that's not where I wanted to be," Sandler says. "With this, I have a better market in Boston, but I also have stations in New Hampshire and Vermont. I get to play with the big boys."

"Steven presented me with an opportunity to do my kind of radio in a great town, and these jobs don't come up often," she continues. "I have the best of both worlds in that I'm 30 minutes outside of Boston, plus I have the advantages of small-town life, because I'm living in Salem, N.H."

"The deal maker was that Steven Silberberg said that his measure of success is doing great radio," Sandler adds. "He believes that if you put forth a good product, good radio will follow. And after years of working for Clear Channel and going through so many [station] sales and so much consolidation, I was really looking forward to working for a small company."

Sandler's first challenge at Northeast is to increase station synergy. "We have really good people in place at all the stations," she says. "We're in the communications business, and it's really about keeping the lines of communication open. The Point and the River are very closely aligned formally, but they've never communicated and used the synergy that's in place to share. We've got the same foresight and the same strengths on a core programming team in New England. One of my goals with these two stations is to get them to work more closely together. For example, we have Widespread Panic coming to the River to do a live performance. I want to give that to the Point as well. There's no reason that they can't run that. Thankfully, I have people in place at the stations that are really doing a good job, so I'm going to let them manage them. I can just enhance what they're doing and be another resource to help make the product better. They've all been in place for so long that they just need some fresh ideas and new blood."

TRIPLE-A COULD WORK ANYWHERE

Sandler thinks that commercial triple-A could work in any market, especially Boston. "Triple-A is radio for intelligent people," she says. "And because there are so many colleges and universities in Boston, there are a lot of intelligent adults here that are open to music. There are two commercial triple-A stations thriving here ... historically, we tend to be the little guys though, so we need to do something to get noticed."

Sandler says that part of the reason for the format's low profile lies in Arbitron's methodology. "A lot more people listen [to triple-A] than Arbitron reports. Our listeners are intelligent, professional adults. When someone calls them for dinner time and asks them to participate in a survey, their first reaction is to hang up the phone. Our listeners don't historically participate in these types of surveys, so we're severely underrecognized ... That's a problem inherent in Arbitron's methodology."

That said, Sandler states that "without a doubt, triple-A breaks records. We started Norah Jones, and the record began selling. The label saw the sales and started working it to other formats. But if it hadn't been for the local enthusiasm, that wouldn't have happened. It's the same thing with John Mayer. The other formats don't glom onto these things until there's progress being made somewhere else. We're the format that takes chances."

"Then you have heritage artists like Bruce Springsteen, Tom Petty, and Peter Gabriel that are core artists that don't have a home in another format anymore," she adds. "A lot of classic rock stations will only play the older library material. When I worked at [classic rock WBGG] Big 106 in Miami, The Rolling Stones came out and they couldn't play anything from it. They played classics Springsteen and that was it. Triple-A is the format you can go to hear that album, but we're also the station you can go to hear Norah Jones, which was the album of the year."

Sandler cites the band Mraz, Sam Roberts, Rhet Miller, Nickle Creek, and John Eddie as current acts with the potential to expand beyond their home format.

At the same time, a lot of the singer/songwriter sound that has been core to triple-A has again been appropriated by top 40 and top 40 radio, with the exception of a few acts that are often much younger. Such artists as Vanessa Carlton, Avril Lavigne, and Michelle Branch don't have much utility for Sandler. "Age really has nothing to do with it," she says. "We played Shannon Curfman, and she's 14. But it's about getting down to what's real. John Mayer is real, Shannon Curfman is real, and Avril Lavigne is manufactured. We are playing her at one of the Boston's [adult top 40], though. It's a case-by-case basis. I don't just want to play a song because it's a hit song. I want to play a great song from an artist that's really an artist. I don't want to feel like it's somebody's hits and manufactured. I want to believe that it's coming from them and it's real."

THE ULTIMATE RADIO JOB

"The radio I'm doing right now is exactly like the radio I got into the business for," Sandler continues. "It's a small company, and I'm able to program great music with the directive to be adventurous, creative, and unique."

Unfortunately, that's not the goal of the radio industry right now. It's very Wall Street driven. And I understand the need for that, but that's not what I got into radio for. I got into radio because I was passionate about radio and music. I have my ultimate radio job in a great city, doing the kind of radio I love, playing the music that I'm passionate about. And I get to go out and find new artists that I believe in and help start their careers. By that same token, the reason I resigned myself to getting out of radio is that these stations don't exist on a mass level anymore. Instead you have [Clear Channel chairman/CEO] Lowry Mays saying, 'we're not in the business of playing music, we're in the business of selling advertising.' I understand that, but the way we sell our advertising is by doing great radio."

Sandler plans on using her experience to educate the on-air and programming staffs at Northeast on how to learn from them as well. "We will nurture new jocks and try to cultivate them," she says. "Also, I don't want to come in and dictate what we're doing—I want to benefit from their feedback. I have walked into a place that has a lot of passionate people; they love the music and their stations. I want everyone involved, and I want it to feel like a team. That's something that has been missing in radio in the post-consolidation era. There's too many directives coming from the top and not enough teamwork. That's what I hope to create here."

MONITOR PROFILE

[Radio has too many directives coming from the top and not enough teamwork]

Nicolle Sandler

Director of Programming
Northeast Broadcasting

10 A.M.

The Police, "Invisible Sun"
Tori Amos, "Taxi Ride"
Led Zeppelin, "Thank You"
Five for Fighting, "Superman (It's Not Easy)"
Sublime, "What I Got"
U2, "Mysterious Ways"
Jack Johnson, "The Horizon Has Been Defeated"
Marc Cohn, "Walking in Memphis"
Africa Celt Sound System Featuring Peter Gabriel, "When You're Falling"
The Rolling Stones, "Shattered"
Coldplay, "Clocks"
Melissa Etheridge, "I'm the Only One"
Goo Goo Dolls, "Here Is Gone"
Shelby Lynne, "Life Is Bad"

Hair Heritage

Six Months' Rent And A Mattress, Too!

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