



TONY NOVIA

B96 ... Still Consistent After All These Years

□ Todd Cavanah and Erik Bradley carry on a proud programming tradition

Two qualities great programming teams possess are the ability to take a station to the top of the ratings and the savvy to keep it there. Great CHR programming names like Buddy Scott and Dave Shakes have passed through the hallways of WBBM-FM (B96)/Chicago, and current PD **Todd Cavanah** and MD **Erik Bradley** have done them proud by continuing to carry the winning torch Arbitron after Arbitron.

TV Block Programming

There's always something special that makes a radio station work in any market, but there are few, if any, markets where a station can dominate without a great morning show. B96 has this covered. After a year or so of morning show woes, VP/GM Don Marion and Cavanah came up with the brilliant idea to bring back former high-profile morning drivers Eddie & Jobo. The ratings increased almost immediately, and the station's awareness surged.



Todd Cavanah



Erik Bradley

In a unique twist, B96 segues into "Private Lives" after Eddie & Jobo, a daily, in-house-produced sex talk show that runs from 9-10am. Cavanah says, "It's clinical, not dirty, but we do say a lot of things that people can't believe they are hearing on the radio." From 10am-2pm, it's the "Work Dance Party," where hits are mixed together, further creating a unique sound. From 2pm on, it's what Cavanah calls "Hot Hits" type of music and programming.

With this type of eclectic daily schedule, late-night weekend street mixes, and everything else on B96, Cavanah points out that the station is programmed in many ways like

a TV network. "We have a lot of hit shows that service a lot of different people in this market without being too broad. People know to come to this station at specific times for certain things, and we try to get them to tune in on more occasions than just the amount of time they would ordinarily listen. That's what Time Spent Listening is all about.

"There's something to be said about that kind of programming," Cavanah explains, "because you are not at the mercy of what the hits are at a certain time. We can pull through down cycles of bad music by having enough hit shows and hit personalities to get us by. This radio station has great jocks who can get the job done in 15 seconds. It's hard to find talent like that. Erik and I are a small part of this puzzle. We get a lot of the spotlight because we are the most visible. From our GSM Paul Aggessy, who is very programming savvy, to Don Marion, who has made me a better businessman, we have a great staff that has been here so long, it's sad to think of it ever ending."

Steering That Music

While CHR continues to evolve, B96 has moved with the music trends without stepping over the edge, which is not easy.

"That essence of being a CHR is playing the best of the genres out there, whether it's Jewel or Busta," remarks Bradley. "You have to be aware of all those types of music. We're able to play several different types of music and keep a real freshness on the station."

"We have decided strategically that we are going to be the most mass-appeal radio station in Chicago," adds Cavanah. "We are going to play the hits. Once you have that goal in mind, it makes it a lot easier. We have made mistakes at this station. We went through a period

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—Erik Bradley

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where we would play a bad dance record instead of a hit record. I've learned that I would rather play a hit record than a bad dance record just to fit a sound. Once you have that goal and strategy in your mind, it's a lot easier to stick with the game plan."

So what brought about this musical approach? Bradley credits Cavanah with not being afraid to risk musical expansion at B96. "We are a Dance station, but we can also get away with playing other things too. I know it sounds weird, but if you listen to the station, you will hear how it all fits together and sounds

want to win and stay consistent, you need to be on top of what the audience is thinking. If the audience says 'It's a hit record; I like that record,' then why not play it?"

Throughout 1997, rumors swirled that the cities of Chicago and San Francisco were each about to get a new CHR. That rumor became reality in San Francisco when Bonneville's KZQZ was born this summer. To date, B96 has successfully held off other potential CHR competitors that did format searches in Chicago. Cavanah points out that he didn't want to leave B96 open for an attack and has thoroughly tested battle plans.



"We've been attacked. We've been at war and through many battles with this radio station, but we've blocked any attacks in the last couple of years by just being open and

playing hit records. We can't be afraid of playing No Doubt, Hanson, or Spice Girls, as well as Puff Daddy or Busta Rhymes. We'll play huge records whether they're on the pop end or the hip-hop end. This station has grown up in a way where we are now really easy to listen to whether you are 12 or 35 years old."

What is it about a winner that makes it a winner? Cavanah says that when you hit the button on B96, even if you don't hear the call letters and the sweeper or a jingle, you will still know it's B96. "There's something about this station, be it a vibe, a soul, a heartbeat. Part of it is longevity — being a consistent product without a lot of change. When we talk about change, we talk about adjustment, but it's like a can of Coca-Cola — you open it, you pour it, you taste it, and it's the same, it's consistent. There's something to be said for consistency. That's what B96 has really done a good job of. Whether it was Buddy Scott, Dave Shakes, or myself, there has been consistency to this radio station."

Next week, Todd Cavanah and Erik Bradley discuss B96's mega-marketing, format labels, and offer tips on how to be successful.

awesome," says Bradley.

"At times you can overthink something like this so much that you lose track of reality. What it comes down to is, we are a hit radio station whether we lean a little Rhythmic or a little Alternative," remarks Cavanah. "We got to the point where we wanted to make money, be the biggest, and put the other stations that were in the female 18-34 demo out of business. The only way to accomplish that is by playing the biggest hits in the market. We also learned that we had to be big in the suburbs. We had to grow from just being a city-core, ethnic radio station, so the people in the suburbs would feel that we were a station that was safe to listen to. We have focused our target demo to attract that, and we are going after it."

Avoiding 'Inside Thinking'

Sustaining dominance for a long period of time is difficult, and it's something Cavanah, Bradley, and the staff at the station continue to do. Cavanah has been with B96 since 1988, and he's careful about not attempting to change too much too quickly, because it can be damaging. "You have to be open enough to make the right adjustments at the right time but not go overboard. Erik and our entire team have done a great job noticing and keeping on top of things but not overreacting. I believe there's too much inside thinking in this business. If you

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