

Rod Schwartz

Account Executive
KHTR-FM/KQQQ-AM

&

Owner

Grace Broadcast Sales/
Radio Sales Café

Pullman, WA

by Jerry Vigil

Yes, you read his title correctly. Rod Schwartz is an Account Executive, a salesman, being interviewed for a production magazine. But wait... he's not your ordinary salesman. Rod knows a few things about what we do, too, particularly when it comes to what makes radio advertising work for his clients. And he's been making those ads work for 33 years at the same stations in the small market of Pullman, Washington. But his story doesn't stop there. Along the way, Rod established Grace Broadcast Sales, a family run company servicing radio with syndicated "sales booster" programs as well as creative services. And more recently, he launched the fast-growing Radio Sales Café, a social website for radio salespeople.

You'll find some great stories and lots of worthwhile information in this two-part interview. Check this month's RAP CD for some excellent commercial work from Rod, and don't miss the rest of the interview in next month's RAP.

JV: Tell us about your start in radio.

Rod: In January of 1973 I backed into what has become a lifelong career in radio advertising. I answered a classified ad in the newspaper for a sales job at WFMB in Springfield, Illinois, and it was there I think I learned my first conscious lesson about selling, and that was the value of persistence, because at the time, FM was still the weak sister and AM was the powerhouse across the board. FM really didn't come into its own until sometime later in the '70s, at least as perceived by advertisers as having value. So we were the country FM.

Here I was, 20 years old, sporting an afro and wearing my father's old suit to apply for this job -- I was out of college and things were different in the early '70s. They politely listened to me, interviewed me, considered my story and told me they'd get back to me. When I hadn't heard back from them after a few days, I called them and said, "Have you decided what you want to do about me?" They said, "No, we're still interviewing people and we'll let you know."

I didn't hear anything for a few days after that, so I called back and I kept on calling back. I showed up once or twice as well at their doorstep just wanting to know. The last time I showed up, the guy, Jack Hoskins I think his name was, said to me, "You really want this job, don't you?" And I said, "Yeah. That's the whole idea." He said, "Well, okay. You're hired. We'll give you a try." So he set out the terms and they were favorable. And so thus began my career in radio sales. I didn't know anything. I had no prior training. They just give you an account list and a rate card. I mean literally it was that cliché. "Here's your account list. Here's your rate card. Go get them. Here's the package for January and February." It was 100 spots for \$300. Some things you don't forget. And it was payable over two months -- \$150 a month for two months, January and February. Use the spots however you wanted. So that's what I went out and tried to sell.



L-R: Daughters Rebecca and Heather, wife Paula, and Rod

JV: So this was your first taste of radio? No broadcasting course or related experience prior to this?

Rod: I didn't have any sales experience at all. No radio experience either. My experience in radio was listening to WCFL and WLS as a kid growing up in Chicago. I got married out of college and we moved to Springfield, Illinois, but I was born and raised in Chicago. I think the first job I took was at a music store selling pianos and organs and guitars and decided that wasn't for me.

JV: No prior ambitions about getting into the exciting world of radio; you just saw the ad and went for it.

Rod: It was a job.

JV: So how did that first radio sales job work out?

Rod: Well, I guess I must have liked it. I sold some people that had not been on the air before or had not been

on the air for a while. Chris Lytle in his book *The Accidental Salesperson* nails it. His background is radio by the way. He nailed it when he said that most people that end up in a sales job, and in radio in particular, didn't set out to do that. They just ended up there for whatever reason, and that was certainly the case with me.

Anything I learned, I learned on the fly. Our sales meetings were coffee with the station manager, Bill Wheeler, at a place across the street. We'd spend half an hour or 45 minutes in the coffee shop, and it wasn't really any kind of formal sales training. He'd make some suggestions here and there, and other than that, it was up to me to just go out and beat the brush.

I guess I did well enough that I could have stayed there, but I did not like Springfield. I didn't like the environment there. Perhaps it was the politics of the place, and perhaps with a wife and a new baby, I just decided

that living in a small town with lakes and trees and so forth readily available, that's what appealed to me as a place to live.

So I started reading the classifieds in I think it was called *The Pulse* at the time. A station in Winona, Minnesota was advertising for a salesperson. So I wrote a letter and applied for the job and they flew me out. This is after perhaps a year and several months at WFMB. So they hired me in June of 1974 and I went to Winona, Minnesota to work, population 26,000 maybe. I don't remember. It was a small town along the Mississippi, but a beautiful place; just a gorgeous town.

I went to work for KAGE AM and FM, for a fellow by the name of Jerry Papenfuss. I spent five and a half years working in Winona, and that's really where I learned the business of radio advertising sales. Jerry was a wonderful boss, and the managers that he hired under whom I worked were also great

people.

In 1975, we hired a fellow by the name of Jim Williams. He's legendary in the business, in small market radio anyway, as the first serious radio sales trainer. We hired Jim for some sales training, and as a result of applying what we learned from Jim, our sales department grew from two of us to maybe 13 or 14 salespeople by the time I left. And Jerry acquired more stations. I think he now owns several in Fergus Falls and in Blue Earth, Minnesota and in Waseca, Minnesota. His group is called the Results Radio Group. He's still an active broadcaster. He and his wife show up for work every day, and I have just the utmost respect for Jerry.

JV: What did Jim teach that allowed that sales force to expand and profit so significantly?

Rod: Jerry hired Jim Williams to be our consultant, at least we called him a consultant at first but he really wasn't. He was an industrial trainer, a sales trainer for radio salespeople. I think the biggest thing he taught us was belief in radio because, as he put it, radio salespeople have an enormous inferiority complex. Radio was getting its butt kicked by newspaper. Newspaper was the big biller at the time -- you know, the competitor we all feared. TV wasn't so much a factor in the small markets, whether cable or broadcast. But newspaper was the formidable competitor. And often the radio guy would go into an advertiser, whose ad he had seen in the newspaper, with a me-too attitude. You know, let's put this ad on our radio station, and he'd be grateful for the crumbs of the budget. 95 percent of the budget would go into print and 5 percent into radio to call people's attention to the print ad, and we'd be happy with that.

Jim was opposed to media mix. He said, "Listen. Radio can do the whole job but you have to think like the newspaper people." He said the only way to compare radio to newspaper is dollar for dollar and time for time. So, if you're going to test radio, here's how you test it. You get the whole budget and you put it on the air the same way the advertiser is putting it on the news-

paper, which means, if the advertiser is running a full page in the newspaper and it cost let's say \$500 at the time for a full page ad in a newspaper, then you should be asking for a \$500 budget and you run that all in one day.

So, with that kind of frequency, the kind of frequency that a newspaper sized budget would provide an advertiser when run in the same period of time, you couldn't help but get people's attention. So Jim's technique was largely to run high frequency schedules with lots of price and items just as the advertiser would do in the newspaper. And it worked. I mean that was the thing. We gradually got people to give us the benefit of the doubt once, and it worked. So they'd come back and do it again and again.

I remember vividly one account that I had, Winona Fire & Power, and their business was appliances, TVs. That was about 80 percent of their business and 20 percent was power equipment: lawnmowers and tillers in the summer and snow blowers in the winter. And their big competitor was the long established department store in town. This was one of the old style department stores that took up a square block and was three stories high. On one floor they did just carpeting and on another floor they had appliances and TVs. And these were the guys that, when they had their big semi-annual sales, would run four or five full pages in the newspaper every day.

So I went to Winona Fire & Power and I said, "You know, you should go against these guys when they have their sale with your sale, only put it all on radio." They gave me the benefit of the doubt once for a weekend sale, and it worked so well that they did it again and they did it again. They became my best advertiser in Winona, and for years after I left, they continued to be a real strong radio advertiser. They took such a bite out of this department store's business that the department store actually ran an ad saying, "We don't own a radio station." So it was an interesting time.

One of the first people that was hired when we got into our growth mode was a lady who came to the ra-

dio station and asked for a sales job because she was so impressed by the ads she was hearing on the air for Winona Fire & Power. She became the second top biller at the radio station. She took to it like a duck to water.

JV: Did being around the "show business" of radio give you any desire to become of jock, or were you strictly focused on sales?

Rod: Well, it was mainly sales, but you know, everybody that gets into sales wants to go on the air. In fact, that was one of the big things in sales, those guys who secretly wanted to get an air shift but couldn't get hired on that basis and said, "I'll even sell." Then they would hope that they could be hired as a salesperson and eventually transition into an on-air career.

I suppose like most people that get into radio, I thought that it would be fun to be a disc jockey. So, in Springfield, I asked if I were able to sell advertising for a one hour show, a couple three times a week, would you let me do it and they said, "Sure." So I went out and found three sponsors for what I called Country Classics. It was just playing country oldies for an hour sponsored by these three different people. One of the announcers at the time -- I want to say his name was Dave Musgrove -- he was a real nice guy with just a big old bass voice, made for radio. He had worked for Jerrell Shepherd in Moberly, Missouri and then was hired at Springfield. But he sort of took me under his wing and gave me some advice and so forth. He was going to record my debut show on the air: Rod Thomas doing Country Classic.

It was such a disaster. When the mike was handed to me and I had nothing to say. I hadn't prepared anything. I just figured it was just going to come out and it didn't. So, fortunately, one of the other announcers was sitting next to me, and he sort of took over and manned the controls and let me talk as best I could. Anyway, after the show, Dave gives me this cassette and he says, "Here, I recorded your first show for posterity." I listened to it and I could not break that cassette into enough small pieces.

So I realized I'm not cut out to be a radio announcer, at least not that kind. I did a Christian show in Winona but that was different.

JV: At some point along the line you got into the creative side of things with regards to the commercials. When did that come in?

Rod: Well, I had cut some ads in Springfield and it was passable. You practice enough and you can do something passable. But, in Winona, my second boss was a guy by the name of Len DeSomer. Len had been at one time a copywriter for J. Walter Thompson, and he had worked for Jerry Papenfuss previously. He came back to work for Jerry in, I think, my second year in Winona. He was just a superb producer of commercials. He had a style that was comfortable and conversational and immediately engaging. He just had a way of drawing you in. I listened to him a lot and asked him to teach me production and he did. So I began doing more commercials in Winona for certain clients.

I also got into the habit of recording clients doing their own ads, and at that time, that was just a taboo. You just didn't hand a microphone to non-professionals, meaning the advertisers, and let them get on the air. But I learned that, if you spent enough time working with them, you could get them to sound not bad. So maybe early on, I flew in the face of the taboo and just continued to move in that direction. Now it's common practice to put advertisers on the air and they sound very good. Anyway, I did more and more ads.

I was also introduced to a company called Broadcast General, and its principal was a fellow by the name of Jim Shetler. I didn't know much about him at the time except that he was producing these syndicated features for different holidays and special events, and he had one in particular for Memorial Day that featured stories of Medal of Honor recipients and I really liked it. I just enjoyed the content, enjoyed the way he produced them. So we would buy those from him, and I resold them, sold a sponsorship to a grocery store at the time. Every Memorial Day would

come around and he would sponsor these Memorial Day vignettes. Jim was also producing one called "Salute to the American Farmer," and I would sell those to an implement company and maybe a feed store. And as long as I could sell sponsorships, Jerry would pay the freight to license these features from Jim.

JV: Where'd you go next?

Rod: After five and a half years in Winona, we moved to Pullman, Washington, where I live now. I took a sales manager's position. At the time it was with KQQQ-FM and KNOI-AM. There were a series of call letter changes over the years, and the stations are now KHTR-FM and KQQQ-AM. I took that job in September of 1979 and moved out to Washington State from Minnesota. I've been here ever since, although I did resign as sales manager in 2006.

JV: How did Grace Broadcast Sales come into existence?

Rod: When I came to Pullman, I continued to buy these programs from Jim Shetler for sponsors that I would sell here in Pullman. One day I got a letter in the mail from Jim Shetler's son and daughter to the effect that Dad had passed away and, if any of you had -- speaking to broadcasters -- if you still had any of his tapes, feel free to use them and I'm sure Jim would be happy to have his voice living on that way. Well, it was an impractical suggestion, if sentimental, because these things were dated and for very specific purposes. Anyway, I had thought over the years that it would be fun to do what Jim is doing. So when I got this letter, I contacted his son, Ted. I said, "I would be interested in finding out if you were willing to sell the company, and if it were possible for me to work it out to continue it. I would like to do that." We had some discussions and he was going to confer with his sister and get back to me. I didn't hear anything from him for a few weeks, and in fact, lost track of him.

Then one day, out of the blue, UPS shows up at our doorstep with two boxes, and they're addressed to me and they're from Ted Shetler. No return ad-

dress. They contained files with scripts and computer diskettes with mailing lists and advertising templates. In other words, it was the records of Broadcast General and no invoice, no way even of getting back in touch with him. So now you know why the business is called Grace Broadcast Sales, because it was dropped into my lap.

JV: Wow! Great story.

Rod: We then had an opportunity not only to, shall we say, continue what Jim had been doing, but I had definite ideas for improving on what he had been doing and now I had a chance to do it. The first series that we produced was the Memorial Day series, the Medal of Honor citations. And then we did one for Independence Day, I did the "Salute to the American Farmer," and I just started adding to our repertoire as it were. And amazingly, stations would pick them up and buy them just as I had done when I was Jim's customer.

JV: How long are these programs?

Rod: They're short form: 30 seconds, 60 seconds. We call them sales boosters, and they're short form features for holidays and seasonal celebrations, special events, cause marketing. They are used as openers to commercials. Now sometimes a sponsor will just tag it, you know "brought to you by" and then the name of the business and their tagline or whatever. I think most stations will run a full commercial adjacency afterwards. But every station does something different with them. I remember we were doing a promotion for National Agriculture Week and we had a client in Minnesota who, I kid you not, would put three sponsors into a five second tag and sell 200 to 300 sponsors that way -- small packages but they were making money with it.

JV: So Grace Broadcast Sales started basically picking up where Broadcast General left off. How have you grown the business since?

Rod: We grew it by expanding the number of offerings. I had the advantage of a background in radio advertising sales whereas Jim was a computer

guy. He was an IT guy who was just doing this on the side. So I had the opportunity to bring my advertising sales background into the equation and fine tune these products for the needs of advertising sales departments as I understood them to have these needs, and also to the advertisers who would be associated with them. So it was really a neat opportunity to grow the business and we did.

And then, at the same time, I started offering some freelance copywriting and production as well, which we do. But the majority of what GBS does is still the syndicated features.

And it's become a family business. My wife is my business manager and bookkeeper and webmaster. She has designed and maintains our website. My two daughters are my salespeople, and they each have their own areas of responsibility. They also do some research for me for writing the features. So it's become a nice thing. We celebrated our 20th anniversary last May.

JV: Congratulations. That's a wonderful story. How many different programs would you say you have available to radio stations?

Rod: I haven't counted recently but I would say over the years we've probably developed somewhere between 80 and 100 of the syndicated programs. They don't all fly every year; it all depends. For example, we were doing a series of vignettes starting in September of 2002 for Patriot Day, commemorating the attacks of September 11, 2001 from the standpoint of honoring the memory of those who died; even more importantly promoting the need to support our troops who are fighting in the war on terror. And what it was really doing was giving voice to the people.

At least in the small towns -- I don't spend a lot of time in the big cities -- but in the small towns, you drive through the downtown area, people have these reader boards or signs in their windows, and they're flying the flag and they're saying "support the troops" and "we will not forget," and that kind of thing. So these radio features were designed to allow these peo-

ple an opportunity to convey publicly on the radio airwaves what they were conveying from their reader boards and their marquis and their storefronts. We would sell a few of these every year.

But then last year, with the 10th anniversary, it sort of exploded. Everybody wanted to get on the bandwagon, and we had quite a few new people take advantage of the series. I'm not even sure we're going to do one next year because the circumstances have changed with our troops having pulled out of Iraq. I will consult with our station clients who have been doing it for a long time and ask if it's something they want to continue to do before I commit to doing it. That's what I mean as an illustration of programs coming and going or having a lifespan and then having run their course. We'll see.

JV: You mentioned Grace Broadcast also offers copywriting, production and voiceover services. Tell us more about that side of the business.

Rod: The freelance opportuni-

ties that I've had as a result of offering those services on the website have been relatively few and far between. I've not made a great effort to offer these services to radio stations, most or all of which have their own production departments and copywriters, whether the copywriters are in the sales department or they've actually hired full-time copywriters. So there's not, as I'm sure many of your readers would agree, there's not a lot of outside paid production work generated by radio stations.

JV: So the services are there if somebody wants them.

Rod: Yeah. They've got their own people to do it. The people that have responded to my freelance efforts have been my own clients rather than other radio stations. Occasionally I'll be asked to do a page of liners or to do an ad for one of the sponsors of one of the series. But no, it's not the biggest part of what we do.

JV: I assume you work closely

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with your station clients on their creative?

Rod: Yes. In some cases, I've worked with these clients for decades and continue to do so. I have a great deal of flexibility and freedom. Having been with the stations for 33 years, the owners cut me some slack. It works to our mutual advantage.

But I love to write, and that said, writing is also hard work. But I love it. That's why I resigned my management position at the radio station, so I could have more time for writing. I've been wanting to blog, and I've wanted to write for the trades, and I've wanted to spend more time cultivating some freelance business for people who had expressed an interest.

But honestly, it's radio advertising sales that I've been in for 40 years now. We're all in sales, we really are, whether we admit it or not. And certainly copywriting is selling, just a different mechanism for it.

I've always enjoyed the challenge of combining words and sentences in a fairly compact way -- because that's what we've got to do our job, 30 seconds or 60 seconds -- and seeing those words eventuate in business for an advertiser. That, to me, is just the biggest thrill I still get, when an advertiser says, "Hey, it's working." And, if it's not, then we need to find out why it's not.

But I've managed to have pretty consistent success with the people that

I work with so that I'm not one of those people who hears, "Well, we tried radio and it didn't work." I've talked to some of those people when I've taken them on as new clients, and I am pleased to say that if one is willing to put in the time and the effort to uncover the client's story and then to tell it, radio is a phenomenal medium for getting that story to enough people in an affordable way so that a client continues to do it. The biggest indicator in the success of an ad campaign is the fact that the client renews his contract every year.

JV: Is your process for creating a commercial for an advertiser pretty much the usual: interview them, get their story, find out their USP?

Rod: I don't so much use what people typically call the CNA or the Client Needs Analysis anymore, although it is in fact that. It's just not structured so rigidly, because each advertiser has perhaps a little different objective. The purpose of a commercial is usually either to help sell a product or service or to shape or change the way a consumer thinks or feels about a brand or simply to create awareness of and hopefully open a relationship with the advertiser.

I think it's probably Roy Williams who has been the clearest on the job of the copywriter being not so much to create a client's story as to uncover a client's story, the idea of a USP or whatever, and to figure out what is it

about the business that appeals to its current customers and how can I take that information and convey it to somebody who is not doing business with that advertiser and cause them to want to do business with that advertiser.

So my approach tends to be pretty straightforward, and my writing style tends to be straightforward and conversational. I'm not real big on gimmicks. Gimmicks may be fun for a producer, but if they don't really move the relationship between prospective customer and advertiser forward, then what's the point? They're just a distraction. They're just entertainment. Maybe I'm just not good enough at coming up with gimmicks and it's easier to just tell the truth. I think it was McCann Erickson, their slogan, "Truth Well Told." I like that. You know, just tell the truth. And Ogilvy said, "Truth is better than creativity." Chris Lytle quotes him a lot. That's kind of what I think too.

■

Next month, we wrap up our interview with Rod and get more on Rod's copywriting philosophy and some advertising success stories. We talk about his way cool new website for radio sales people called the Radio Sales Café. We dig more into Rod's techniques for using clients in ads, get some thoughts on sales versus production and more. Rod welcomes your comments and questions at Rod@GraceBroadcast.com.

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