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BY PAUL KNOWLES

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CKCO
50 YEARS
C T V

The more things change...

CKCO-TV RETAINS ITS ORIGINAL
VISION, 50 YEARS LATER



(l-r): Vice President and General Manager Dennis Watson, past General Managers of CKCO-TV Bill McGregor and Don Willcox.



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It was a big-league vision, articulated by CKCO-TV founder Carl A. Pollock as the television station went on the air for the first time, March 1, 1954. Pollock shared his dream with the viewers – the very few TV owners there were at the time: “Our purpose is to provide an entertainment and an education service – an interesting home companion for you.”

It could be argued that darned near everything has changed in the 50 years since CKCO-TV was founded. The programming has changed, the audience has grown unimaginably, and then splintered with the 500-channel universe, ownership has changed several times, and the technology has grown

through innumerable generations.

But some things have not changed at all. CKCO-TV still operates from its original address; its state-of-the-art broadcast tower still sits on the original site on the Baden hill; and Pollock’s original vision still works as a modern motto for the business – entertainment, education, “an interesting home companion.” In fact, an

indispensible home companion for just about everyone.

Today, Dennis Watson is CTV Vice President and General Manager at CKCO. He says that the station has never lost Pollock’s idea of service to the local community. “It’s an objective we work hard to

Commitment to local newscasting and community presence is “a strategy, a business decision.”



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(top left photo, clockwise) Bill Inkol (right) hosts "Bowling for Dollars" in the 1970s; Big Al (Jones) in front of the original CKCO building which was in the same location as the current building; The 1980s sports team, Jeff Hutcheson, Wayne Kooymann, Don Cameron and Bill Inkol (front); Betty Thompson hosted "Be My Guest" and Johnny Walters hosted "Trivia Company" in back to back live shows in the 19080s. Photos courtesy of CKCO-TV.



achieve. We want people in our coverage area to see as as their TV station."

And today, CKCO is indeed seen as the channel of choice for viewers in its coverage area. Viewership figures from Fall, 2003, show CKCO dominant, with 19% of all viewing homes; next is Global, at 9%; everyone else comes in at 4% or less. Watson says, "Today, over a million people a week watch the station; they average about four and a half hours a week with us ... In this market, we're the number one."

Watson has been General Manager at CKCO since 1995; and despite its 50-year history, the station hasn't had a lengthy list of GMs. Two former General Managers with long associations with the station are Don Willcox and Bill McGregor. Willcox has nothing but good to say about his years at the station, expressing deep-felt "appreciation to CKCO and CTV." McGregor is a fount of information about the history of the station.

According to McGregor, the original parent company, Central Ontario Televi-

sion Ltd. was formed by Carl Pollock, President of Electrohome; Kitchener-Waterloo Broadcasting Co. Ltd., owners of CKCR Radio; and Famous Players Canadian Corp. It was a sensible partnership - CKCR brought the broadcasting expertise, Famous Players the video skill, and Electrohome made TVs.

CKCO, by the way, stands for Canada, Kitchener, Central Ontario, says McGregor. CKCO was originally a CBC affiliate, although most of its history has been connected to CTV. Today, the station is a division, with CTV, of Bell Globe Media.

In the early days of local telecasting, the networks supplied a limited amount of programming, and the CKCO staff

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quickly became adept at producing many hours of local entertainment and news programs. Today, the 15 1/2 hours of regular local programming is exclusively news and current affairs – with occasional exceptions such as the Oktoberfest Parade – but in the early years, programs ranging from children’s shows (Romper Room, Tree House), talk shows (with hosts including the popular Betty Thompson), music (including the enduring Polka Time with Grammy winner Walter Ostanak) were all produced in the CKCO studios. And, as any CKCO veteran will mention, there was the weekly “Bowling for Dollars,” hosted by the affable Jeff Hutcheson, now a regular on Canada AM.

Hutcheson is only one of many CKCO alumni who have risen to national prominence in news and network programming. Lisa LaFlamme, Joy Malbon and many others are making their mark with CTV and elsewhere. General Manager Watson says that the CKCO team is “proud” when a team member – from in front of or behind the cameras – is recruited at a national level. CKCO is seen “as a stepping stone, where people hone their craft and can get noticed by the network.” In addition to on-air personalities, Watson mentions camera and technical staff who have moved on to successful programs like “Survivor.”

But the real success story of CKCO is found right here at home, in the ongoing impact of this television business in the heart of Waterloo Region. General Man-



(left to right) The current news team of Weather Dave MacDonald, Anchor Janine Grespan, Sports Randy Steinman and Anchor Brent Hanson.

ager Watson again points to the role CKCO plays in its community. Not only is the commitment to local newscasting and community presence the right thing to do, he says, it is also “a strategy, a business decision. This has been ongoing for 50 years. We’re trying to get out and touch the public. The community respects and likes the TV station.”

When CKCO went on the air, the challenge for Carl Pollock – whose company eventually acquired its partners’ shares, ultimately becoming known as C.A.P. Communications, for Pollock’s initials – was to serve those few people who actually owned TV sets. Dennis Watson says that in 1954, the population of Kitchener-Waterloo was 65,000, but only 3,000 people owned television sets.

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Today, says Watson, the challenge has changed. With multi-channel cable and satellite, “I can find ER in six places, maybe more.” So why would viewers chose CKCO? Watson believes the station’s commitment to the community – and to high quality local newscasts – has produced loyalty in the viewers, “loyalty, not so much to the programming, but to the station.”

While viewers may be able to watch C.S.I. on other stations, “they’re not going to show Bluevale playing Cameron Heights, or the Elmira Maple Syrup Festival.”

Janet Taylor is point person for community relations at CKCO. She ticks off a long list of community projects and programs in which the station is directly involved. If something good is happening in their coverage area, she says, “we want to be part of it.”

Watson agrees, and notes that it is not hard to find good things to be involved in. “This is a very caring community,” he says. He recalls coming to Kitchener-Waterloo nine years ago; his first impression, he says, was “how caring this community is; what a great place.”

Running a television station in 2004 is a complex and interactive challenge. Advertising sales – the economic engine that drives the business – is vital but complex, in a multi-channel, multi-media universe. Technology changes daily. In one way, programming is less complicated on the local level, because, in sharp contrast to the early days, when network programming was a relatively small

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CKCO current location on King Street.

piece of the puzzle, today CTV provides much of the daily programming.

However, Watson insists, the local news content on CKCO is "vitaly important." That's the daily, local face of the station to its viewers, "the one thing we offer that nobody else does." That's why current newscasters like Janine Grespan, Brent Hanson and perennial weatherman Dave MacDonald are household names in the coverage area. In fact, Watson says MacDonald "is probably the best-known personality in the community."

Watson is also quick to point out that while CKCO runs CTV network programming, the station still has a certain autonomy. "If something of great public interest comes along, we have the right to preempt the network at any time." That goes beyond breaking news to events like parades – CKCO stakes an informal claim to having covered more

Veterans like the late Betty Thompson set a standard for community involvement that will never be surpassed.

Christmas parades than any other station – Oktoberfest celebrations, and "Town Halls" on local issues.

One of the ironies of working in the television business is that a few people – like the newscasters – are known for their work on-screen, but CKCO actually has a staff of 105. That is down from the 165 people who worked in the often-renovated building on King Street in the early 90s, but in those days, the TV station shared ownership and facilities with a radio station. Those entities were sep-

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arated during ownership and licensing changes.

Technology has also changed job descriptions. CKCO news veterans remember the early days when doing a filmed report at the scene – let alone a live telecast – was enormously complicated. There is general agreement that videotape and "live eye" on-the-spot broadcasting have been the two biggest improvements in technology to date. Bill McGregor calls video tape "the most important development."

There is more to come. During a tour of the station, Watson points to staff working at computer stations, where digital editing is the next new thing, a technology that is completely changing the videotape editing process.

But Watson and Taylor both quickly point out that all the technology – and television lives and breathes technology – is just about tools; the key is the people. And the CKCO people are community people, and always have been. Veterans like the late Betty Thompson set a standard for community involvement that will never be surpassed, but it is a tradition that CKCO encourages its people to emulate.

Watson says – with perhaps slight exaggeration – that everyone at the station is involved in their community, "not because we tell them to – they want to." Taylor adds that "our on-air talent are eager to be involved" in community projects. "It's just amazing."

But dominant viewership figures, community commitment and respected local newscasting still don't guarantee a

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strong bottom line for an enterprise that is first of all a business. Watson says that 20% of the commercials aired on CKCO are sold locally, and he admits that "generating revenue for anybody in the media is challenging." There is competition for the advertising dollar, and the number of competitors is growing.

However, Watson – perhaps predictably – argues that despite its higher costs, TV is where broadcast advertisers get the bang for their buck. He points out that, on a weekly basis, 1,138,000 people watch CKCO, a total of 5,727,000 hours a week. He argues that for advertisers to reach the number of people who watch a CKCO newscast at 6 p.m., they would have to buy ads on every local radio station, every hour.

Radio executives might possibly have a counter-argument, but this story is about 50 years at CKCO.

Recent investments in the CKCO facility would suggest a certain level of sales success – the new tower on Baden Hill, erected three years ago, cost \$1.3 million; the new editing suites at the station involve an investment of \$5 million.

CKCO has a sales team of 11, includ-

ing a sales office serving Chatham-Sarnia. That's because the station is actually two stations – Channel 13, serving the Kitchener-Waterloo-Brantford area and also cottage country, and Channel 42, Oil Springs, serving south-western Ontario. At one point, a third channel served the Georgian Bay region, but that area now receives the Channel 13 programming.


Much of the programming is the same on both channels, but newscasts offer local features and a local weather forecast. Watson smiles as he recalls a phone call from a man asking him to settle a bet – the caller was sure Dave MacDonald had predicted a sunny day, while his wife, watching in another part of Ontario, insisted there was a chance of thunder showers. Watson was able to tell them they were both right – they had watched different forecasts.

But while the two channels mean viewers can pick up CKCO right across western Ontario, Watson admits that he is frustrated by the fact that the station is not available on satellite. "There's not enough capacity on the satellites," he explains, "and we're one of the CTV stations that didn't get up." That means if

satellite subscribers want local news – a vital part of the CKCO package – they cannot get it, except by antenna. Area cable service carries CKCO.

Watson expects the problem to be solved. "Satellite companies keep telling us they're going to have more satellites and more space." Taylor says that the absence on satellite service is one of the most frequent complaints received by the station.

There are other complaints, say Watson and Taylor, but not very many. "The odd time we get complaints about shows," says the GM, "but the reality is, you're never going to keep all one million viewers happy, 24 hours a day, seven days a week... but most people are reasonable. And we're not here to annoy viewers. We want them to watch us."

Not surprisingly, given the 50-year history of this community television station, viewers also call to ask why old shows are no longer produced, everything from "Bowling for Dollars" to "Polka Time." But Taylor notes that "a lot of the viewers take the time to thank us for the really great coverage on the news. I get lots of e-mails about local news stories." 

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