

By Bruce Frassinelli

CEO Ed Levine: Focus, Determination and No Plan B

CEO of Galaxy Communications, in charge of 14 radio stations in the region, discusses industry and explains how he made it

On Aug. 9, 1974, Gerald Ford was taking the oath of office as president of the United States after President Richard Nixon's ignominious resignation the night before. At the same time, soon-to-be Syracuse University freshman Ed Levine was driving from his Westchester County home to the campus to be with the crew of then-campus radio station WAER. Levine made up a story that he was visiting a cousin in the Syracuse area, because he thought if he told crew members the truth that he drove 250 miles just to hang out with them they would think he was weird.

The tactic worked, and Levine became the one freshman selected to do on-air work at the popular campus station that semester. He's been getting the edge on the competition ever since.

Levine is president and CEO of Galaxy Communications, which owns 14 radio stations in the highly competitive Syracuse and Utica-Rome markets.

Levine, now 52, knew when he was 15 that radio would be his destiny. As a teenager, he would listen to DJs from WABC, WNEW-FM and WBAI to learn what he lovingly calls the "magic of radio."

In college, he and his beer-drinking buddies would tape WNEW airchecks until the early-morning hours, then emulate that sound the next day on WAER.

Two classmates applied for a permit to launch WAQX and asked Levine to sign on as a disk jockey. He did the 6-10 p.m. gig and loved being on the air, but when his friends sold the station for \$4 million, he learned that the potential for big money, and independence was not behind the microphone. Levine stayed at 95 X for eight years eventually becoming program director and realizing that in this role he was able to influence what went on the air.

He moved on to Albany and became operations manager for Merv Griffin's stations WPYX/WTRY. Levine found that the on-air talent at Albany was far better than he was, prompting him to make a career-changing decision that his future was not on the air.

Levine got a major break when he was summoned for an

interview for the program director's job at KLOL in Houston in 1988. He and his wife, Pam, had just welcomed their daughter, Lauren, into the world. Levine says his wife wasn't thrilled with the prospect of the move at such an inopportune time, but Levine assured her he was just going to meet the top guy at KLOL to hone his interview skills.

"Well, they dazzled me, and got me to say, 'yes,'" Levine says. He called his wife and told her he really wanted the job, so she agreed.

Levine was in Houston only 10 months before he was wooed to an even bigger market — Washington, D.C. — where he was named program director of WJFK.

Partnering with Robert Raide, Levine purchased his first radio station — WKLL in Utica — while he was still program director at WJFK. "I would work long hours in Washington, then fly to Utica and spend the weekend getting things together at WKLL," Levine says.



Levine

Levine skillfully found opportunities to acquire additional properties during the next 17 years and has positioned Galaxy as the No. 2 cluster in both the Syracuse and Utica/Rome markets.

The Central New York Sales and Marketing Executives recently awarded Levine their Crystal Ball Award for his visionary work in the areas of community development and support.

And vision is where Levine excels. He predicts that radio ownership is in a cataclysmic upheaval that has decimated Clear Channel, the behemoth that went on a spending spree a decade ago. The tanking stock market has turned Citadel and other once-corporate media giants into penny stocks.

Levine predicts that several well-known radio companies will declare bankruptcy during the first quarter of 2009. "There will be some fantastic opportunities for well-positioned companies such as ours," Levine believes.

The irony, Levine says, is that radio as an industry has never been healthier. "We have been stereotyped as old media, but 93 percent of the U.S. population listens to radio," he says. He says the new wave of radio leadership and ownership will be more akin to the Galaxy model rather than the mega-monolith Clear Channel.

Levine's prescription for success is straightforward, just like the man himself — determination, focus and no Plan B. That said, Levine quickly adds that had he known that traveling this road and reaching this level of success would be so difficult, he's not so sure he would have made the trip.

"This is not a business for the faint of heart; it's not for people who don't want to take chances," he says. Stock up on perseverance, he advises. It took him nearly four years to be able to take a full paycheck after buying his first radio station; that's how close they were living to the edge. He admits that, on paper, the Utica station should not have succeeded. In fact, he adds, he made an agreement with his partner that if the Arbitron listener ratings of January 1993 didn't show an improvement from the previous

six months, they would fold their tent and sell the station. Levine says the station's rating doubled to a six share, and the corporation was on its way. "Being good is no longer a guarantee for a job; you've got to be tough-minded, too," he says.

Levine admits that this all-consuming passion comes at a cost. Traveling five days a week between 1991 and 1994 kept him and his wife apart for long stretches. "Pam referred to herself as the single mom who couldn't date," he said.

Recently, Pam Levine became actively involved in Galaxy as its events and promotions planner, and it has become the most successful part of the company, Ed Levine says. "Maybe I should have put her to work earlier," he jokes.

Despite his success, Levine says there is more to do, and he has a dream — to replicate his Central New York success in another part of the country. "I see this as a goal maybe five years down the road; it's a personal pride issue," he says.

Before that happens, however, Levine wants to launch an entrée into adjoining markets, such as the Rochester, Watertown, Binghamton and the Capital region, extending what he calls the establishment of a footprint from the solid base he has foundationed here.

Levine's secret for success? It's no secret — hard work, hands-on management and hiring the right people, which can make or break a company. "I want to know how people will react when they are punched in the face by circumstances in the marketplace," he says.

It's a tough business, Levine says, but it's exhilarating being the boss. Levine never finished at Syracuse University, and he wears this as a badge of courage. His daughter, Lauren, is enrolled in the Newhouse School, Syracuse University's prestigious school of communication. Although TV seems to be her preference now, she works on the college radio station. It would be a dream come true, Levine says, if Lauren wound up in business with her father.