



# (ultra) Small market successes

by Howard Christensen





MY Broadcasting Corporation—at 10 years of age—is still a toddler. MBC's first Ontario station in Renfrew, was licensed in 2004. Since then there have been over a dozen more builds and purchases, most of them in what many would describe as tiny markets.

Only two so far, 95.5 myFM (CIYN-FM) Kincardine and 98.9 myFM (CHCD-FM Simcoe), were purchases. Another may soon be CJMB-FM Peterborough now operated by MBC under a temporary management agreement. The purchase of its assets is set for an October CRTC hearing.

## How It Began

Jon Pole is a co-owner and president of the company and Andrew Dickson is his full, though for the most part, silent equal partner. Pole has been in





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broadcasting for 23 years, some of those years as unpaid help at his father's CKOB-AM Renfrew. When Jamie Pole sold the Renfrew/Arnprior and Pembroke stations to Neil McMullen of Annapolis Valley Radio in 1988, Jon began working part-time for McMullen on a paid basis which only served to deepen his enthusiasm for radio's merits.

To put a fine point to it, said the younger Pole, "it was much better than sacking groceries or working at McDonalds."

He continued going to school and doing on-air weekend shifts until Pelmorex purchased the stations from McMullen. The program director at the time was Scott Jackson, now the president/station manager of LIFE 100.3 (CJLF) Barrie. Pole credits Jackson for being the mentor who taught him how to do broadcast things much better than he had been doing them.

During his last year of high school, Pole's parents moved to Southwestern Ontario. He joined them a year later and began a year's employment under the late Paul Godfrey, then the PD at CHOK Sarnia.

Then, a year later, it was back to school at Ryerson and Humber College in Toronto while he also worked part-time at Standard Broadcasting's CFRB and The Mix (CKFM). It was there that he picked up a deeper understanding of the craft; news, programming and community involvement.

Upon graduation, Pole asked Standard president Gary Slaight what he had to do to move up.

Slaight told him that he had to leave to come back. And leave is what he did.

At 21 years of age, he went to CKSY-FM Chatham as the promotions director but had held that position for just six months when owner Carl Veroba suggested that







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he move into sales. Six years later, Pole was still in sales at the combined CKSY/CFCO Chatham and, he said, “loving every minute of it.”

But then came an offer. Bayshore Broadcasting in Owen Sound proposed that he move there to become the retail sales manager, and he did.

Later, a company called New Revenue Solutions came along. The original idea was for Pole to move to Long Beach, California, but later it was revised to having him open a Canadian operation, working with a number of major Canadian radio operations.

Fast forward four years and Jon Pole had become a married man, tying the knot with his hometown childhood sweetheart. They moved back to Renfrew where a teaching job awaited her.

## MBC's Creation

Andrew Dickson and Jon Pole put their heads together early in the new millennium and began figuring out what it would take to get a new radio licence for Renfrew.

For backgrounding, Dickson, who had been in broadcasting for a number of years at such stops as Ajax, Pembroke and Ottawa, had exited the craft in favour of purchasing a Renfrew print shop. When Jon Pole's father, Jamie, purchased CKOB Renfrew—having sold his print shop to do so—he met Dickson at the Renfrew Chamber of Commerce. The senior Pole told Dickson that if he ever needed a hand with the new print business, he'd be glad to help out. Reciprocating, Dickson said that if Pole ever needed a hand with the radio station to give him a call because, he said, “I know that business pretty well.”

Later, Jon Pole had made up his mind that he, too, wanted to own a radio station.

“I don't know if you believe in hype or pathways or all these motivational speakers,” he said, “but somewhere along the line I read a book or I went to a motivational speaker somewhere and at some point I started saying ‘I want to own a radio station by the time I'm 30'. And when I started saying that, I didn't even know what it meant. It was just the goal I had. It was funny because we were approved by the CRTC in April and my 30th (birthday) was in May.”

That was May of 2004. myFM Renfrew went on the air in August.

Dickson and Pole had just one rule when they began: “If we don't agree, we don't do it.”

Since that time, the two have never not agreed and they've always done it.

## Strategy for Building and Growing

After myFM Renfrew was up and running, Dickson and Pole pulled out a map and identified markets they felt were similar or had similar opportunities for them. The first question was always “is this a market that will fit our culture?”

With few exceptions, MBC markets have the commonality of being close to large urban centres where they are threatened with the loss



of their town's identity. An example would be Napanee. Some think it's part of Kingston while others think it's part of Belleville. But it's not, asserts Pole. It's Napanee.

Ditto the rural communities of Strathroy, St. Thomas, Gananoque, Brighton and Renfrew-Arnprior.

Once a potential market has been identified the next step is determining how they can technically serve it.

The final of the big three questions is "where does it fit inside the group?"

Most of the MBC stations work in a cluster because it's easier from a business point of view, e.g. the sharing of news and management resources, extra cruisers and extra staff who can bounce back and forth. It's the traditional hub and spoke method.

Clustered now are:

Pembroke, Renfrew and Arnprior;  
Brighton, Napanee and Gananoque;  
Simcoe, St. Thomas, Strathroy-Carodac and Exeter-Grand Bend;  
and Port Elgin, Kincardine and Goderich.

Alliston and CJMB-FM Peterborough are, for the

moment, described as Central Ontario since they don't yet fit in a cluster. The Peterborough station is being operated by MBC under a temporary management agreement. An application for a station in Orangeville has also been filed with the CRTC.

## Serving the Markets

MBC now has 15 stations, including three repeaters. Staffing is in the 77-82 range, with 30 of them being news people.

With two to four people per station, most run on a news and sales team philosophy. The MBC advantage over established broadcasters, said Pole, is that the company began in 2004 rather than 1955.

"When we started, established broadcasters told us that we couldn't do it that way," he said. "And then we had three stations and people were asking, 'how do you do that?' And now it's 'can you show me how?' And that's the advantage of having started in 2004. While we don't have all those years of experience, we also can come into a market and do it differently."

Each market is staffed for anything related to the community. But those areas having nothing to do with helping the community are centralized, e.g. music scheduling, billing, accounting, traffic, producing commercials, and so on.

Depending on the size, some have programming people. The jock portion of the hour is centralized. MBC has found that the top four things listeners want are news and information, music, promotions and announcers, in that order.

“That doesn’t mean the announcers aren’t important since they’re an integral part of the first three points,” said Pole. “But our listeners want to have good news and information and they want a friendly voice.

“It’s important that we have a good sales team that’s involved in the community and touching people. The same holds true for a good news team making a difference because that’s what the listeners want.



“In a traditional sense, there are a lot of broadcasters who’d like to be the standalone that we are in most markets but there’s competition from other media. It’s a cliché but the reality is you win by providing great customer service and you win by providing a product that no one else is providing. Our company mandate has been to always provide a price point that every business can afford. I believe that a good local radio station doesn’t just have car dealers and furniture stores on the air. They’ve got chip stands and hairdressers and small sandwich shops so that when you turn it on it sounds like everyone in town is involved. That’s what makes a good local radio station. We focus on going after non-traditional revenue.”

With the exception of Peterborough and Pembroke, MBC stations are located in single station markets.

## MBC’s Future

A while back, a one-page document was created outlining MBC’s strategic objectives over the next 10 years. But about 18 months ago, it had to be revised because all the goals had been met. All staff members have a copy of it and a retreat is held annually to, among other things, review it.

On that document is a line reading: We expect to win community awards. The purpose of that line, said Pole, is that when people come to work every day they should be doing the things that it takes to win awards. “Winning them is nice but if we’re always doing the things it takes to win them,” he said, “then that’s really the goal of how do we super-serve the community.

“It’s easy to broadcast every day but it’s the little things you do that make the difference in the community. We have a saying that goes ‘we always say yes’. When someone asks for help, the answer is always yes, not how much money do you have to spend.”





Of course, determining what that yes means has to follow. Is it an interview, a news story, some free spots?

Every one of the MBC markets has, indeed, won one or more community awards.

## Financial Success

MY Broadcasting has, for three successive years, been recognized by PROFIT Magazine as one of Canada's fastest-growing companies by five-year revenue growth. Pole observed that staying on the list three years in a row still astonishes him because that's tougher than actually getting on the list.

When he and Dickson attended the first trade day that PROFIT organized, they observed all the other CEOs from the fastest growing companies. Their takeaway was that the others all "had to have tremendous amounts of shareholders and money, and while they were growing their sales they weren't necessarily growing their bottom lines. And they all had very complex businesses."

What Pole loves about radio is that it's still basic, "still providing information and a service to our communities and going out and talking to a guy who owns a shoe store or a grocery store and figuring out how we can help them sell more.

"I like that our business model is simple."



## MY Broadcasting Properties as of September, 2013

**92.1 myFM (CIMA-FM) Alliston**

**100.9 myFM (CIYM-FM) Brighton**

**88.7 myFM (CKXM-FM) Exeter-Grand Bend**

**99.9 myFM (CJGM-FM) Gananoque**

**95.5 myFM (CIYN-FM Kincardine)/  
(CIYN-FM2) Port Elgin/CIYN-FM1  
Goderich**

**88.8 myFM (CKYM-FM) Napanee**

**104.9 myFM (CIMY-FM) Pembroke**

**96.1 myFM (CHMY-FM) Renfrew/  
CHMY-FM1 Arnprior**

**94.1 myFM (CKZM-FM) St. Thomas**

**98.9 myFM CHCD-FM Simcoe**

**105.7 (CJMI-FM) Strathroy-Caradoc**