

## Golden West Expands Affordably

*Adopting a 'Cookie Cutter' Approach to Studio Design Helps Bring Radio to Smaller Communities*  
By James Careless

**ALTONA, Manitoba** At a time when radio broadcasters are retreating from small markets, Canada's Golden West Radio is actively expanding into them.

A case in point: The 30-station broadcaster based in Altona (population: 3,709) has just opened a new station in Drumheller, Alberta (population: 7,932). Meanwhile, Golden West is currently eyeing other small markets for expansion.

How can Golden West expand during a recession? The answer is a "cookie cutter" model for designing, building and running small market stations. By developing a uniform approach, the company can substantially reduce development, construction, operation and maintenance costs.

This helps make it possible for Golden West to operate in markets too small to support traditionally launched radio stations.

### The cookie cutter explained

Golden West is not looking to make all its local stations sound alike. In fact, the company has a strong reputation for community-centered broadcasting, and, even with its minimalist approach, "we expect to have a full time staff of eight to 10, even in the smaller centers," said Laverne Siemens, director of engineering for Golden West.

Collectively, they handle sales, on-air work during peak periods and news, with each station running 24/7. Each station responds uniquely to the needs of its particular market with the local information

the audience is seeking.

So how does Golden West do it? The process starts with the technology used to make radio. To save design costs, "We have standardized on one set of broadcast/production studio equipment," said Siemens. "This means that we use the same Axia console in each location, integrated with servers running Google Radio automation and voicetracking."

Generally, the company sets up a separate control room and production room. However, such is the spareness of its production model, that it is possible to integrate both functions into a single space.

This means one of the on-air people can be in studio doing production, while the on-air content is being handled using voicetracking.

### No need for new designs

The beauty of the standardized approach is that a new design isn't needed every time Golden West wants to launch a station. As well, working with known equipment simplifies the process of ordering, installing and troubleshooting new studios.

"It's to the point that we can receive the new station's studio equipment at our headquarters in Altona, and completely wire it together here," said Siemens. "This allows us to test it completely in-house. Then we just take it apart, ship it to the new location and reassemble it there. In Drumheller, it only took a week for us to reassemble the pre-wired studio and get in running. We could have even gone to air!"

And while the design works well, Siemens is not content to let it ossify.

"While we have a standard for today, we are constantly looking for ways to improve it, both in functionality and price point. I kept my eyes open for options at the NAB Show this year," he said.

Once the station is operational, new music is sent to it from the center that maintains the base inventory. "The station gets two complete copies of the music library; one for on-air and one for the server," said Siemens. "In the case of a failure on the main on-air play out computer, the backup system will access music directly from the server."

With the extensive geographic spread of the Golden West stations it permits them to run the same music formats at a number of channels; a fact that allows one person to program several stations at once. This reduces manpower costs, and makes it easy for stations to share voicetracking announcers during off-peak hours.

In other words, the two local DJs in Drumheller can provide off-peak voicetracking for the other Golden West stations. This ensures that the listeners in each market hear a wide range of voices, while minimizing the amount of talent needed overall.

The Golden West stations act as one large team with one center providing the majority of the creative and production, another the traffic scheduling and another the music scheduling.

Finally, for maintenance, Golden West's small stations do not have their own on-site engineers. Instead, service is provided by remote diagnostics conducted over the Web.

When a problem occurs, a Golden West technician can log onto the station's sys-

tem over the Web and find out what's wrong. The technology selected has proven itself reliable and allows for remote diagnostics and control, Siemens said.

For problems in the studio, the Axia Audio Web interface is used for configuration and maintenance. Other station computers are managed remotely via UltraVNC.

For the transmitters, Burk ARC Plus remote control units are used. Siemens noted that the system has a Web interface that also supports PDAs. "Burk worked with us to ensure that even our older BlackBerry units were compatible with the interface," said Siemens. "The latest install used the new Burk Plus-X 300 I/O interface, which gave

us a very affordable extension of an ARC Plus at a different site 100 kilometers away."

### **Limits**

The cookie-cutter model does have a few limits, however.

First, as each station comes with its own unique coverage area and licensed broadcast power, Golden West has to buy and install transmitters on an individual basis.

Second, in instances where a problem cannot be diagnosed over the Web, the company has to dispatch an engineer to fix problems. This is generally done from the nearest center with an on-site engineer but can still lead to a response time of an hour or two.

Third, the fact that an engineer is not on-site full-time when new stations are being built can result in oversights," said Siemens. "Sometimes the tradesmen miss things, and unless one of our engineers is there, the error isn't caught until afterwards."

For its part, Golden West does not pretend that its cookie-cutter model is perfect. Rather, it is an economical solution that makes small market broadcasting profitable, with any problems being coped with as they arise.

"This said, the cookie-cutter model is allowing us to provide local radio in places other companies wouldn't touch," said Siemens. "It's a win-win for everyone; for Golden West, our listeners and the local advertisers that get served."