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From two little transmitters to one big world

Radio station moves to the Web

By Dennis Michael CNN Showbiz Today Correspondent

LOS ANGELES, California (CNN) -- On August 28, it happened again for Nicole Sandler.

Again, corporate mergers were taking the music director's radio station off the air. Again, her loyal audience would soon tune in to hear Spanish-language radio instead of adult alternative rock.

Sandler had seen Golden West Broadcasting sell out her radio station, Los Angeles' 101.9-FM, years earlier. She survived that to rebuild an audience on tiny 103.1-FM, operating out of two low-power transmitters in LA's beach cities. Then the station's parent company, Clear Channel Broadcasting, acquired AM/FM Broadcasting Company; the combined concern had 12 transmitters in the market -- four too many, according to Federal Communications Commission regulations.

The two transmitters broadcasting Sandler's world class rock music had to go.

But world class rock would survive by living up to its name. It went worldwide.

At 9 a.m., that August day, 101.3 FM became the first radio station to move seamlessly from broadcasting a terrestrial FM signal to becoming an Internet Web radio station. No longer would it use transmitters to broadcast a signal.

Sandler had her headphones on in the broadcast studio, alongside DJ Andy Chanley as she presided a little nervously over the change.

"Goodbye to the listeners at channel 103.1 FM and to all the listeners," she said. "See you on the other side."

"There's no looking back now," Chanley added. "It's all straight ahead. We're not going to go anywhere, we're going to keep playing the world-class rock."

Economic decision

The move was inevitable, Sandler says. Local radio stations cannot be competitive if they offer world-class rock.

"It's music that unfortunately doesn't get heard much on the radio and exists in just a few cities around the country and around the world, but they say



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Music director Nicole Sandler is taking a Los Angeles radio station completely to the Internet

it's not a mass-appeal format," she says. "But the thing is, if you put it on the global level (it will have) mass appeal."

"There are lots of people out there who want to hear more than the top 40 and the same songs over and over again and don't want to hear Britney Spears and The Backstreet Boys."

Clear Channel Broadcasting is rolling the dice on what is now called "World Class Rock-dot-com (worldclassrock.com). It's keeping key staffers on board and preserving the cult station intact.

The upside is a possible foothold in the future of Webcasting. The downside?

"We have rent, we have salaries to pay, we have some streaming expenses, but they are nowhere near the expense of operating a radio transmitter," says Sandler. "So therefore, the money we have to bring in is a lot less, and the financial expectations are a lot lower. If we break even the first year, everybody is going to be very happy."

The signs indicate, even in the post-dot-com economy, that "World Class Rock-dot-com" has a happy future.

Growing pains, change

A recent visit after the August change shows things look a little different but still sounded the same.

DJ Chanley is setting up a Creedence Clearwater Revival track to play down the line. He is still a disc jockey, though the disc in question is now a hard disc in another room. He picks his music on a database and plays it without ever touching tape, vinyl or compact disc.



As a radio station, World Class Rock barely transmitted 10 miles; as a Webcaster, the reach is limitless

Moving to the future of radio turned out to be a little more complex than originally expected, he says. "I think we thought, 'OK, we'll just turn off the transmitter and broadcast over the Internet,' but wow, there was a lot to do," Chanley says.

The on-air computer system was one thing; another was a change of mindset for someone used to ad-libbing for hours on local radio. And there are other considerations.

"When we do giveaways, for example: 'Want to go to the concert here at the Santa Monica Civic Center?' Well, maybe not if you are in upstate

New York," he says. "It's hard to throw in airfare for a concert that's tonight."

The shock of broadcasting on a really broad scale is still sinking in. In the old days, two-transmitter days, the station barely carried 10 miles. Now the reach is limitless.

Sprawling audience

"We've gotten e-mail from Barcelona, to Greece, to Brazil, to Germany to London plus all over the U.S.," Sandler says. "We have a strong contingent listening in Chicago, New York, Boston, Florida. It's pretty amazing."

When Clear Channel begins actively promoting its Web production, it will have plenty of possibilities. The company owns dozens of radio stations around the country, each with its own Web site, each with a possible link to World Class Rock-dot-com. Its Web site has space for advertisement, and its audio signal can run commercials, which is terrestrial radio's main means of support. The station may well have another advantage: timing. Radio is going through a metamorphosis just as the music business is coming face-to-face with a high tech future. Sandler says the music artists, particularly those with the highest profile on World Class Rock-dot-com, have a vested interest in it.

"A lot of artists are just riding our their current contracts, in order to take control of their own work and their lives and livelihood," she says.

"They'll be releasing their own music, using the Internet as a tool to market and sell it and cut out the labels."

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