A WAY TO TRANSFORM BROADCAST MEDIA

In March 2023, a Seattle-headquartered broadcast and AV system integration company specializing in facility design, installation, and project management rebranded. With a new name, ZTransform didn't miss a beat, with the construction of new studios and implementation of updated broadcast technology for a local radio station perhaps emblematic of what's next for company founder Erik Utter and his team.

In 2004, Utter opened the doors to what for 19 years was known as Utter Associates. It's worked with some of the world's biggest technology companies, while also building out broadcast radio and television studios.

As 2024 began, ZTransform gained notice for its latest project to involve an over-the-air radio brand. This time around, the task was a significant upgrade to the facilities used by Seattle's noncommercial Jazz station, Pacific Public Media's KNKX-FM. New studios were just part of the needs for the station — literally saved by listeners who in spring 2016 contributed funds to preserve programming that had been heard under its previous ownership as KPLU-FM.

With Managing Partner Ben Wolk by his side and Paul Catterson promoted in January from VP of Strategy to General Manager, facility design and work-flow architecture were some of the key considerations that went into the KNKX project. Looking at the station, which had become so successful that it had outgrown its studios, required a two-way conversation from the very start of the construction plan.

"They're really a dream customer because there was not an RFP process," Utter says, explaining that KNKX did not seek bids from multiple companies. "We have completed several in-market radio station moves, and in other markets, but in Seattle in particular we worked with a couple of the largest non-commercial stations in their moves."

Utter is referring to the relocations and upgrades seen to two nationally recognized radio organizations — Classical KING and eclectic Adult Alternative pacesetter KEXP — over the last five years. The KNKX leadership team toured those facilities, which received a lot of media attention in Seattle. Not knowing who built those stations' new homes, the KNKX team determined that what those stations gained from their moves was precisely what Seattle's Jazz home needed. "We were brought in after a relatively short interview," Utter says, with ZTransform's team walking through the design and integration process as they learned more about KNKX's vision. "We entered into a contract in no time … and they're not all that easy."

In just a few weeks, ZTransform was hired, with most of the time used to determine the scope of work they would be required to achieve. "One of the things I always like to say about this is that the local staff — the engineering manager or the architecture firm involved — in a lot of instances are first-timers when it comes to moving a facility. Most of the time you really need to do some hand-holding and some education on what's really involved. What are the realistic time frames? Who are the other players that you need to bring to the table? There's an awful lot of coordination with those other players."

With references checked by KNKX, ZTransform went to work. The first step was to ensure cooperation from the station, which had already engaged with an architect: V Three Studios of St. Louis. That company had been tapped by Bonneville International to build out its San Francisco-Oakland radio station hub in Daly City, Calif., among other projects across multiple industries.

Erik Utter

"Very few architects specialize in radio and TV broadcasting," Utter notes. "That was very, very helpful for everyone involved." A building hadn't been identified, however, and test fits were being done in several potential locations. Eventually, KNKX landed across the street from one of Seattle's most popular tourist stops, Pike Place Market.

Interestingly, the waterfront building KNKX chose was one Utter had once worked in while employed as an engineer in a post-production facility no longer housed there. Twenty years later, Utter's onetime office, and everything else, was gutted. ZTransform and V Three then worked closely on everything from space planning to electrical and acoustical design. Furniture and room layout and a conduit cable pathway and cable tray were also discussed as part of the construction plan.

"We were effectively a consultant to the architect in the earliest phase of the project, and that is fairly standard," Utter says. "That is how we want to be brought in on a project. It's better to bring your system integrator in early to identify and collaborate on these things than to fix it later. The timing was perfect when we came into the picture."

With the collaborative conversation now including topics such as mechanical systems, electrical needs, and lighting, Sellen Construction was hired as the contractor; ZTransform had worked with that company on two previous broadcast contracts, making the KNKX project flow even more smoothly.

"There are unusual things about building TV and radio facilities," Utter says. "You have unusual acoustic considerations, with floating floors and floating ceilings. You have specialized power requirements, with isolated grounds and backup power. All of that is a little unusual, so working with an architect and a contractor that have some experience really makes a project go that much smoother."

A SITE FOR MORE EYES

For KNKX, being highly visible in the Seattle community was very much a part of the site-selection process. It speaks of the station's commitment to its listeners, and its present programming mix. "In addition to being a Jazz station, they are also an NPR Member station with a news department producing quite a bit of local content daily," Utter says. "They wanted to integrate tightly with the local community, so that location and that visibility was exactly what they were looking for."

A performance space was envisioned from the get-go, allowing the public to come in, much like KEXP and KING offer at their respective Seattle Center facilities near the Space Needle.

With KNKX's construction moving ahead, were cost overruns and sticking within the budget overriding concerns? Was working with a noncomm on a project of this scale perhaps different than with a for-profit operation? "Budgets are always a concern, regardless of the customer and their financial health," Utter explains. "There was certainly a value engineering process at play here."

But Utter notes that with noncommercial station projects, there's much more flexibility in the budget. "We sit down with the customer and really try to understand what they are trying to accomplish," he says. One of the challenges for ZTransform was to coordinate the needs of two different groups within KNKX — the news division and the music division. "They are using the same facility, in the same physical space, with really different functions and requirements, so that sometimes they are at odds with each other."

This is where the interaction among all interested parties becomes an essential. The result? Utter says, "We developed a budget for us, as they were leaning on us to tell them what the budget should be."

Then, in a move wholly dissimilar to anything a commercially licensed station group would be able to do, KNKX went forth with a fundraising drive developed based on that rough order budget. "The other noncommercial stations we've worked on have gone through similar processes," Utter says, with fundraising goals pegged to that estimate.

> ## "We are not just designing a technology, we are designing a workflow, and that is more important than the technology."

A TASTE FOR BROADCAST UPGRADES

Utter began his career in 1992 as an engineer and operations specialist in that post-production company once based in KNKX's new home. Later, he spent 5 1/2 years as a broadcast engineer for NBC Sports' coverage of four Olympic Games.

That experience helped Utter gain broadcast television industry clients, including News-Press & Gazette Co., the privately held Missouri-based group that pioneered ATSC 3.0 technology at its Santa Barbara, Calif., station group. While NPG is widely recognized for its TV properties, it continues to own a Regional Mexican FM in Palm Springs, Calif., and an AM/FM Talk combo in Colorado Springs, Colo. — facilities that ZTransform had a hand in building under its previous company identity.

"We have had a long-standing relationship with News-Press & Gazette and have built, or rebuilt, every single one of their TV and radio stations over a multi-year process," Utter says. "By the time we finished the last one, they were ready for a refresh at the beginning of that circle again!"

Utter calls his team's work for NPR a great example of a project he's led for a commercially licensed broadcaster, while on the noncomm side, Oregon State University's Corvallis radio and television stations are also notable.

As of late February, ZTransform was in the midst of a series of master control upgrades for the NBC Owned Television Stations.

Asked if there is one side of the broadcast media industry that is driving ZTransform's business in 2024, Utter replies, "I would say 75% of our business is in TV, and what drives the TV business for us is market consolidation — the News-Press & Gazette model." In that instance, the operations of those stations will be done remotely through a Colorado Springs master control center, using a hub-and-spoke model. This technology is driving the local TV business, Utter says. Another concern for broadcast TV is the relocation of production control into the cloud — a big need for broadcast news.

On the radio side of the business, most of ZTransform's work involves noncommercial station licensees; Utter explains that this is the result of the fundraising model KNKX and other operations have created to help pay for their projects. Next up for ZTransform: the move from Tilikum Crossing to KOIN Tower in downtown Portland, Ore., for All Classical Radio. "As the costs continue to go up, they are able to fundraise around that, and we are excited about the project because they are building a world-class facility."

Then there's the education vertical, meaning a college or university looking to build out a TV studio for student instruction can contact ZTransform, and Utter's team will put the project into play for the school. He particularly likes the long funding cycles associated with colleges and universities as they discover students may not be thrilled with learning on long-outdated equipment not seen in the professional environment.

POWERFUL PACTS

Outside of broadcast, ZTransform also has high-profile corporate and new media clients. "Hands down, those are our biggest customers — by a wide margin," Utter says. However, he's unable to share details about these projects due to client confidentiality agreements.

Meanwhile, ZTransform elected to use the Wheatstone AES-67 compatible WheatNet-IP audio infrastructure for its projects. Additionally, Broadcast Electronics (BE)'s AudioVault was selected for audio storage, studio automation, and playout.

"We're big fans of Wheatstone and WheatNet," Utter says, adding that a new radio station project sees ZTransform intending to use an Axia console from The Telos Alliance. "They are rock-solid systems. We are not ever doing reboots, and our service calls are more operational. The flexibility that reduces cost, and design and integration, is perhaps the biggest benefit."

A benefit of moving to an AES-67-based system, Utter explains, is removing a lot of patch. Then there is the removing of "a ton" of cabling from the system — along with all of those failure points. "What you are gaining is the flexibility to have any signal available anywhere at any time, and that applies not just to audio," Utter says. "That applies to contact closures. There are dozens of them that are a part of the WheatNet system."

As Utter concluded the conversation, he was asked what he'd say given the chance to provide an elevator pitch on why ZTransform stands out from others in its space. He replies, "My background is in engineering. I have a very strong understanding of workflow, so where I think we stand out is in workflow design. We can very quickly get our heads around 'what are we doing today?' and 'where are the issues and bottlenecks and extra costs involved?' so we can design a system around a workflow that fits. We are not just designing a technology, we are designing a workflow, and that is more important than the technology."