



**DEBORAH PARENTI**  
DIALOGUE

# Country Music: “Looking At An Upswing”

**W**hile preparing for the next issue of *Radio Ink*, which will focus on the country format, I spoke with Jaye Albright and Michael O’Malley about the biggest issues facing country music and, hence, country radio today. Jaye Albright and Michael O’Malley of Albright & O’Malley Country Consulting agreed to share their perspectives with *Radio Ink* Dialogue readers. I invite you to pull up a chair and listen in on their conversation.

**Jaye Albright:** The sluggish economy makes it difficult to do what must be done, not only for the country format, but also for radio as a category. Radio’s most optimistic revenue projections for this year range from flat to maybe up 2 or 3 percent. That, in spite of 15-20-plus percent drops for the last two years, making the comps at fairly low bench-

marks, means that the staff cuts of at least 10 percent for the average company and compensation givebacks of about the same amount by the average employee will not be reversed in 2010. At a time when radio needs to invest in developing online and mobile platforms driven by content, only the very confident and courageous among radio’s owners will be hiring this year. If you have a job, you’re

going to be asked to do even more in spite of the fact that you may already feel stretched to the breaking point.

**Michael O’Malley:** Radio currently gets only 2 percent of local new media ad dollars, according to Borrell Research, in last month’s *Radio Ink*.

and 2,358 country stations. Country continues to deliver strong audience shares in both diaries and PPM, but we’d perform better if we could find a way to hold on to women while attracting more males.

**JA:** Exciting, new names are on the horizon for the format, but as usual they are highly polarizing. Each time in country’s history a radically new superstar has emerged, the traditional core audience has been uncomfortable with the sound. Garth Brooks’ “Shameless” didn’t test well with 35-plus when it first came out. Folks got up and walked out in the early 1980s at Alabama concerts because the group “wasn’t country.” Now, Taylor Swift music ranks at the top of album sales, airplay, downloads, and concert ticket sales, but also “burn/tired of” and “dislike it” research tracking.

**MO:** What’s different this time is that even the biggest hits’ CD sales are plummeting, and albums may no longer be a viable business in the near future. Billboard recently reported that individual tracks accounted for 57 percent of all digital music sold in 2008. And increasingly, the hits have been selling better relative to all music. Jennifer Lane, president of Audio4Cast.com, said the top songs “are still in demand, and radio — online or on the air — still has a part to play in that game.” I’m particularly excited about the successes several newer acts had last year. If their subsequent efforts are as strong, we could be looking at a nice upswing in the format.

**JA:** The audience dictates the market now, yet radio continues to look to record labels for promotional tools, and labels try to supply them in support of airplay in spite of the fact that sales are anemic compared to just a few years ago, and trending down. Ironically, at the very same time, labels want radio to pay them for airplay as



Jaye Albright



Michael O’Malley

**WE NEED TO REPLACE AUTO WITH NEW, EMERGING ADVERTISER CATEGORIES. COUNTRY LISTENERS STILL INDEX VERY HIGH IN VEHICLE PURCHASES, BUT THAT FACT NO LONGER DRIVES THE BUSINESS IT DID.** — *Jaye Albright*

**JA:** Speaking of growth, we need to replace auto with new, emerging advertiser categories. Country listeners still index very high in vehicle purchases, but that fact no longer drives the business it did. And when you’re big, you make a great target for everyone smaller than you. In Arbitron’s 2009 “Radio Today” report, country ranks just one-tenth of a share behind the 12-plus audience leader, news-talk, with a 12.5 share of total average-quarter-hour listening. In spite of that, managers feel they have to cut rates to stay on buys coming through the traditional pipeline.

**MO:** There are 2,634 news-talk stations in the U.S.

their future business model. Radio already pays millions in licensing fees and finds it difficult to conceive of paying any more. They also want artists to share their touring and other revenue sources too.

**MO:** Fortunately, the more complicated things are, the more help outside advisers can be in this environment. As a result of that, and working internationally, our business has been simply terrific. ■

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