

Putting the magic back into SA broadcasting

 By Leigh Andrews

21 Mar 2017

Tony Sanderson is the 'doesn't look or sound like he's in his 70s' radio personality behind the success of Magic 828AM, which had roughly 80,000 listeners at their last own-audited report from end-November 2016. He elaborates on how they're getting the broadcast model right and what's wrong with radio.



Sanderson.

Sanderson is the man behind the concept of 'Solid Gold', a radio engineer who helped create the country's original [Broadcasting Act](#) back in 1999. He also designed and built the station itself with emphasis on the importance of back up as well as a separate prep room for DJs to ensure they're ready for the show away from the distractions of the main studio. Their backing by AEEI Group, the biggest BEE company listed on the stock exchange, is also impressive, but Sanderson's about more than just meeting the legal BEE requirement – he has a true love of the law and his DJs are on air not to fill quotas but because of an innate talent, something you can't just pick up.

For example, brunch time DJ Graeme White was on-air on Monday, 30 January just after 10am when Sanderson walked me around for a look and feel of the studio space – easily chatting while programming his show on screen. And when last did you have the opportunity to step out of the office onto a patio where you can breathe in the fresh air with a panoramic view of Devil's Peak? For me it was in a previous job, when I was based in Pinelands, but that's what the Magic 828 staff do daily, as they're based at 45 Raapenberg Road – Sanderson says they're the only truly independent station in SA as they control their own mast.

The true meaning of broadcast independence

Sanderson adds that the worst radio disc jockeys or DJs are those who share their personal woes on air – we're just not concerned with what the DJ's day was like, stubbed toes and spilled coffee aside, as we have our own issues to deal with and are overwhelmed with content on a daily basis. There's too much talk – opinionated talk, at that – and not enough music hits.

That's why Magic828 follows the EVE model, which is one that works overseas that they've adapted well for the local market: It means their audience gets Entertainment, Variety and Education, in that order, from a mix of legendary and new talent such as that of author Carol Mashigo on the weekday late-night slot; drive show host David Guselli, who has racked up 35 years behind the mic; and the fresh voice of Nicola Duddy. These DJs don't touch the music format at all, nor will you hear that repetitive playlist at Magic 828. Instead, it offers pop, ballads and love songs from the 60s, 70s, 80s and 90s, with a fine thread of what Sanderson calls 'future gold', with hits from the likes of crooner Bruno Mars that you just know will be on request for decades to come. The station listens to its listeners too, having done away with rock music on Sunday nights as it just wasn't drawing the crowds.



The Magic828 presenter line-up, by Pete Woo.

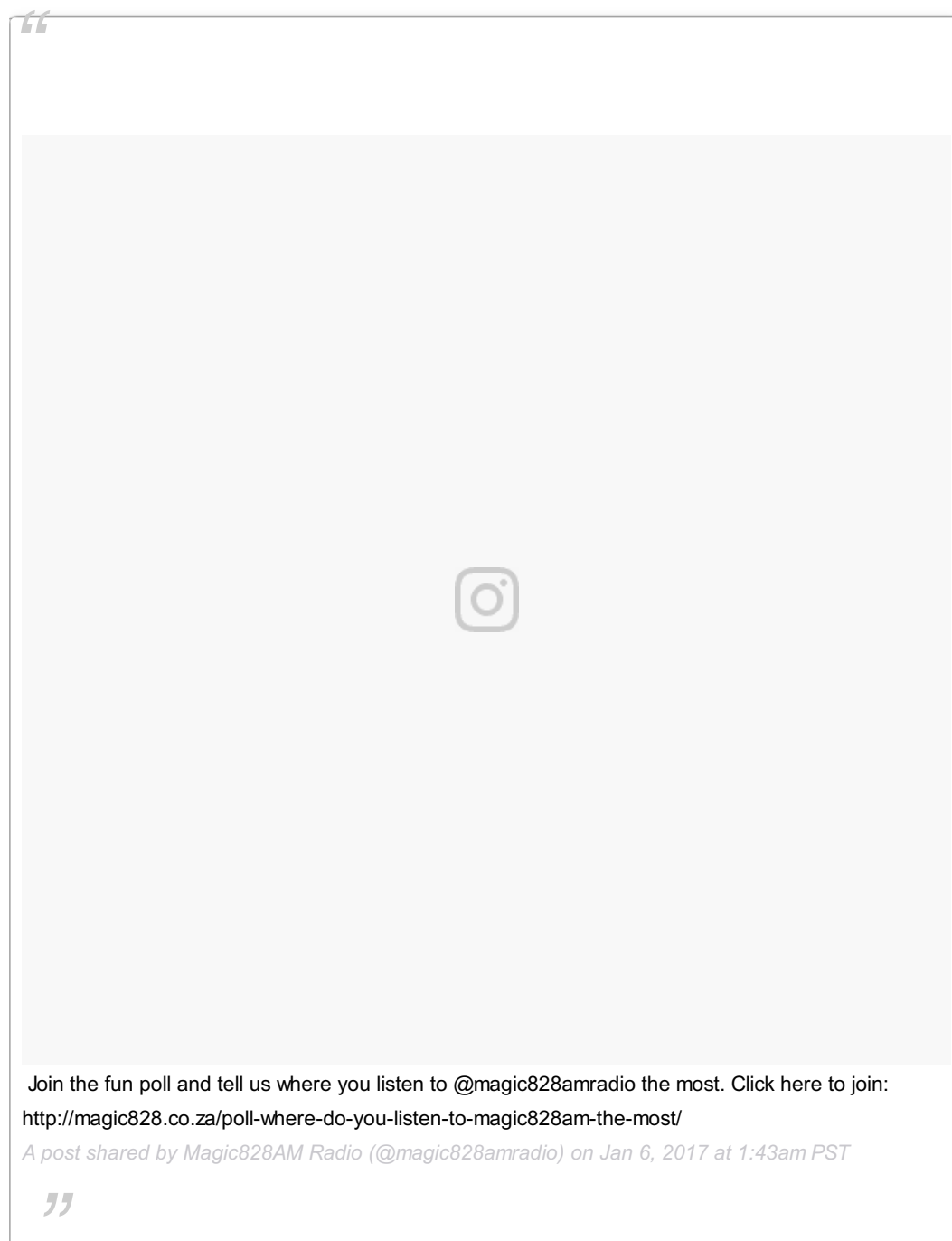
On why they went with AM or medium wave over the more popular FM frequency, Sanderson explains it is quite literally oversaturated at the moment and that there's little chance for more at the moment as the SABC owns most of the frequency, which will only change when digital analogue broadcasting or DAB comes in. The army used it and it fell away in the 1980s, now the modern car aerial picks up AM with ease, and Sanderson jokes that Magic 828 is even available in stereo if you stream it and use Bluetooth.

There's also a touch of 'up there down here' syndrome, with stations 'upcountry' not knowing what's going on in the Western Cape. Interesting as medium wave Magic 828 is available as far afield as and in Johannesburg at night. They also have 5,000 overseas listeners, including a Qatar Airways pilot, and spots in Italy and at the Springbok Club. They're also exceedingly active on Youtube and other social media, because that's where their audience spends its time. Diving deeper into those independent listener stats, Sanderson says 95% of Magic 828's listeners are active on social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter and Instagram over other stations' listeners. The split is roughly 60% female with an average age of 42, and 60% of their listeners tuning in for three hours or more at a time. In addition, "testimonials from advertisers show they recoup their money and then some", with a strong conversion rate as the brands are reaching exactly the captive audience they had in mind.

Decoding the decade-long digital delay

The topic of measurement is a sore one though, as Sanderson clarifies they use their own external research as the industry standard RAMS are "quite frankly a joke, particularly as some of the stats show figures for stations no longer on

air, and others are grossly under-representative". This then has a snowball effect on advertising, with clients not wanting to advertise with stations that have supposedly low listenership. While he feels many are simply too cowardly to stand up and say anything's wrong in case they get punished, he's taking the leap and breaking the mould.



"I think it's an unmitigated disaster what's gone on," he says. "We saw radio stations that haven't been broadcasting getting figures, and stations that have been broadcasting getting nothing. Now they've macro-ed the figures, meaning they've divided the percentage into the national percentage of listenership. What goes on up in Joburg or in Durban has got nothing to do with the listenership down here in Cape Town," says Sanderson. The response? "We'd need so many millions to do it properly like that." That may be so, but it's also misleading not to do so.

In addition, we're at least a decade behind the rest of the world when it comes to the switch over to DAB and DTT or digital terrestrial television, due to internal conflict over the required set-top boxes, which doesn't stand the country in good stead internationally. At the crux of all the flaws is the fact that the industry is lacking basic guidance and education, and the medium/balance is missing.

Sadly, most of it has simply fallen away – either long-forgotten or not instilled in the first place. For example, Sanderson points out that we're increasingly seeing commercial advertising in community stations, which should be focused on sharing helpful information and geographical stats.

Finetuning and reteaching for a stronger broadcast future

It boils down to a basic lack of understanding of what happens, how it happens and why it happens that way. Not that there's anything wrong with the basics. We have a wonderful Constitution, Sanderson points out – he has a copy of it in his office and frequently reads it, as he has a great love of the law. He says sadly lots of people have said, "I'm in power, and democracy is that which suits me when I'm in power." It's exactly that attitude of "We'll give the people what we want, as that's what suits us," that bothers him. He says it simply doesn't work as they'll turn on you eventually. So, we need to start looking at these organisations to put the market right.

Sanderson says one of the biggest problems is that when the Broadcasting Act was written back in 1999, there were three defined areas in radio broadcasting – PBS or public broadcast service, which is the SABC; then commercial radio, for the likes of Magic 828; then community radio – but those lines have blurred extensively over the past two decades.



Magic celebrations.

"Nowhere in the world other than here do they allow community radio to have commercial advertising on it," he says, as that makes it a commercial station. In addition, people simply don't understand the purpose of bodies like SAMRO, which exist to protect music rights. So many section 21 companies or community stations then simply don't pay tax or the same music rights percentages as commercial stations, which have to put a lot of investment in, while many of the community stations are further assisted by government to the tune of R1.4m per station.

"It's like giving your four-year-old child the keys to your Mercedes," says Sanderson: It's all very well doing so, but how about also explaining how to build the station, how to set it up and run it – nobody bothers to teach these basics or offer guidance anymore, so they stumble along, with a huge amount of community stations falling apart. That's snowballing into a problem for the commercial stations now, as the community stations charge advertising agencies rates they shouldn't be going anywhere near. What they should be doing instead, and what Sanderson says was his intention, along with that of many others when the Broadcasting Act was written, was that they should go after sponsorship.

For example, large supermarkets in the area should sponsor an hour or two of the community station's broadcast. They should talk about breastfeeding, AIDS, legal and other community issues – "Don't play music and radio commercials," he says – the whole intent has gone and it's become a hodgepodge out there.

Luckily, Sanderson is putting together a SETA-endorsed broadcast training programme to get the industry back on track, to instil that knowledge gleaned over half a decade himself in order to ensure a brighter future for local radio.

For more on Magic 828, follow the conversation [on Twitter](#) or visit [their website](#), which also lets you tune in for live streaming via your computer or mobile phone. That's what I call the magic of broadcasting.

ABOUT LEIGH ANDREWS

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