

orlandosentinel.com/business/orl-cover1608jun16,0,4903694.story

## OrlandoSentinel.com

### HD radio gets off to a stealthy start

**Change is sweeping the airwaves, but quietly, as stations add digital signals.**

Christopher Boyd

Sentinel Staff Writer

June 16, 2008

Wayne Nusbaum owns two digital radios and loves how they sound and is thrilled with the new stations they receive -- so much, in fact, that he wonders why the rest of the world is slow to share his passion.

"Electronics geeks have these things, but I don't know anyone else who has them," said Nusbaum, a former audio engineer with Motorola who lives in The Villages retirement community. "I lived my life in radio, so I had to have these. I'm a classic early adopter."

Nusbaum, 57, has a lot of programming to explore as broadcasters use digital technology to piggyback two or three alternative programs on a single frequency. Listeners with eclectic tastes will discover alternatives on supplemental digital bands. Those who tune into Cox Radio's WHTQ 96.5FM in Orlando not only will receive its classic rock programming, but can switch to a secondary band that offers news and talk.

Many of Central Florida's largest radio stations have added digital signals to their broadcast frequencies in what is the biggest change to sweep the industry since the arrival of FM stereo in the early 1960s.

But the march to digital is stealthy in the extreme. Only about 1 million digital receivers have been sold, and automobile manufacturers haven't rushed to make them standard in new cars. Even radio stations that have added digital broadcasts acknowledge that most listeners know little, if anything, about the technology.

"There is still very little traction for this," said Sean Ross, vice president of music and programming with Edison Media Research, which tracks radio and TV trends. "The people who make the sets are optimistic, but there is skepticism. The penetration is still very low."

An April survey from Arbitron and Edison Media Research revealed that the percentage of people who recently heard about HD radio, as digital is commonly known, was nearly unchanged from a year earlier.

That is in stark contrast to the digital television conversion, which is taking place under government mandate that will convert all channels to digital next year, ending analog broadcasts. No one expects analog radio broadcasts to disappear, nor will analog radios go off the market.

But other surveys have shown that the majority of those who listened to digital radio say it sounds better than standard analog.

Clear Channel, the nation's largest radio chain, has embraced the format, which transmits information packets rather than radio waves. Like other digital formats, it is extremely precise -- stations don't bleed into adjacent frequencies on the dial. That precision allows broadcasters to pack several signals on a single frequency.

Chris Kampmier, programming director for Clear Channel's seven Central Florida stations, said the introduction of digital radio has a long way to go before it captures a broad audience.

"We are in the third year of rolling out the technology," Kampmier said. "There is a terrific end benefit. The same amount of bandwidth that is used to transmit one analog channel could handle seven or eight digital ones."

In the long run, that could mean a much larger footprint for a radio station. Instead of broadcasting one stream of programming -- say alternative rock -- it could add two or three more, each catering to a different demographic and, presumably, a different set of advertisers.

Three of Clear Channel's Orlando-area FM stations now broadcast digital signals. It had hoped to have all seven using the format, but a technical problem with its Bithlo broadcasting tower has delayed the rollout.

The company is broadcasting commercial-free content on secondary frequencies. Since so few receivers are in use, Kampmier said the company has no immediate plans to put advertising on those companion stations.

#### More broadcasters go digital

Clear Channel isn't the only large broadcasting company to use digital to expand its palette of Orlando programming. CBS has added a second channel, called HD2, to its 105.1 FM (WOMX) station. The primary station, which broadcasts in both analog and digital, plays adult contemporary music. The station's HD2 band, available only in digital, focuses on music from the 1980s.

CBS's O-Rock 105.9 FM (WOCL), which was an alternative rock station until last January when it moved to the classic hits, has brought back alternative on 105.9's HD2 channel.

Christian broadcaster Z88.3-FM (WPOZ) has two HD channels in addition to its principal station. One broadcasts Christian hip-hop and rhythm and blues. The other offers Christian rock and alternative rock.

Bob Struble, president and chief executive officer of iBiguity, the company that developed the HD Radio format that has become the medium's digital standard, said the pace of acceptance will begin to quicken.

"The progress over the last six to 12 months has been pretty exciting," Struble said. "That vast majority of major stations have made the conversion to digital. It was clear that no consumers were going to buy these radios if the programming wasn't on the air already."

Struble acknowledges the obstacles. There are a vast number of analog radios in use -- about 3 billion, Struble says -- and in most markets there are many stations broadcasting, giving listeners a lot of choice from.

Cost may be a factor

Struble says that people will buy digital radios when they want to replace or add a receiver. But the price of HD sets remains quite high -- \$75 or more in a world where small analog radios sell for less than \$20.

Satellite radio is another factor. XM and Sirius, the two satellite broadcasters, want to merge, but even if they do, audio lovers will still have a satellite alternative to terrestrial broadcasting that is without advertising. Satellite subscribers must pay a monthly fee to listen, which limits the audience.

Robert Unmacht, media consultant and radio expert with iN3 Partners in Nashville, Tenn., has doubts that the HD radio will go as smoothly as its backers hope.

"Unfortunately, they chose a technology that isn't easy to implement," Unmacht said. "It doesn't work well for AM or very well for FM."

iBiquity disputes that, saying its brand of digital produces sound quality that is equivalent to compact discs on FM and gives AM stations the ability to broadcast in stereo.

#### Other obstacles to HD radio

Unmacht said there are other obstacles. Digital radio is already available through Internet broadband. He said future technology will likely make it easier to move broadband distribution to radios directly, eliminating the need for conventional radio receivers.

"Once you can get Internet in cars, things will be very different," Unmacht said. "Everybody these days is working on getting broadband in cars. When that happens, every local station will be competing against every other station in the country."

That, he said, puts HD radio in a race against time. Unless it can have explosive growth in the near term, the technology may become obsolete before it is ubiquitous.

But radio stations are doing business in the here and now, and most see investing in the new technology as a necessity.

"Right now, there aren't many receivers out there," said Dale Spear, vice president for operations with WMFE, one of two Orlando public radio stations. "If you want to be in the game, you have to invest in this today."

Station Frequency Format/Owner WPOZ-HD 88.3 FM Christian Adult Contemporary, Central Florida Educational Foundation WPOZ-HD2 88.3-2 FM Christian Hip-Hop and R&B, Central Florida Educational Foundation WPOZ-HD3 88.3-3 FM Christian Rock and Alternative, Central Florida Educational Foundation WUCF-HD 89.9 FM Jazz, University of Central Florida WUCF-HD2 89.9-2 FM Public Radio News/Talk, University of Central Florida WMFE-HD 90.7 FM Classical/NPR, Community Communications WWKA-HD 92.3 FM Country, Cox Radio, Inc. WCFB\* 94.5 FM Urban AC, Cox Radio, Inc. WPYO-HD 95.3 FM Hip-Hop/Rhythmic, Cox Radio, Inc. WHTQ-HD 96.5 FM Classic Rock, Cox Radio, Inc. WHTQ-HD2 96.5-2 FM News / Talk, Cox Radio, Inc. WMMO-HD 98.9 FM Soft Rock, Cox Radio, Inc. WRUM\* 100.3 FM Tropical, Clear Channel WJRR\* 101.1 FM Rock, Clear Channel WJRR-HD2\* 101.1 FM Indy Rock, Clear Channel WJHM-HD 101.9 FM Rhythmic/Top 40, CBS Radio WJHM-HD2 101.9-2 FM Gospel, CBS Radio WTKS\* 104.1 FM Talk, Clear Channel WOMX 105.1 FM Hot Adult Contemporary, CBS Radio WOMX-HD2 105.1-2 FM Totally Retro, CBS Radio WOCL-HD 105.9 FM Classic Rock Hits, CBS Radio WOCL-HD2 105.9-2 FM Alternative, CBS Radio WXXL-HD 106.7 FM Top 40, Clear Channel WXXL-HD2 106.7-2 FM All New Hits, Clear

Channel WMGF-HD 107.7 FM Soft AC, Clear Channel WMGF-HD2 107.7-2 FM 60's and 70's, Clear Channel WFLF\* 540 AM News/Talk, Clear Channel WDBO\* 580 AM Talk, Cox Radio, Inc. WQTM\* 740 AM Spanish/Adult Hits, Clear Channel WDYZ-HD 990 AM Family Hits, Radio Disney

-- \* Soon in HD SOURCE: iBiguity

*Christopher Boyd can be reached at 407-420-5723 or [cboyd@orlandosentinel.com](mailto:cboyd@orlandosentinel.com).*

Copyright © 2008, [Orlando Sentinel](#)