

Profile

Burns Nugent: the proper amount of seasoning for working for the NAB

A seventeenth-century English clergyman, William Jenkin, put it this way: "The more you practice what you know, the more shall you know what to practice."

Perhaps that's what the National Association of Broadcasters had in mind when in May 1972 it tapped seasoned broadcaster Burns Nugent, as executive vice president for station relations, succeeding Grover C. Cobb, who became head of the government-relations department.

Mr. Nugent has a broad background of broadcasting and management experience, having served with the WMT-TV Inc. stations from 1953 until 1967, when they were sold to the Orion Broadcasting group, and with the Blackhawk stations for the next five years.

He started out with a law degree from the University of Iowa, but as he tells it, the legal profession was not among the most lucrative fields in the early 50's and he accepted an offer from his uncle, Bill Quarton, to join the WMT chain. "I never regretted that decision," he says. Bill Quarton, who managed the WMT operation and subsequently became part owner of it (and, incidentally, served as NAB's joint board chairman from 1963 to 1964, following Clair McCollough's tenure), "was an outstanding broadcaster," says Mr. Nugent. "He taught me everything I know about the broadcasting business and about management."

From listening to Mr. Nugent, it can be speculated that his employees at the WMT and Blackhawk stations enjoyed their associations with him. The 48-year-old decedent of sturdy Irish stock has a philosophy he calls "Nugent's four rules of management" which he says apply to the operation of any business—from a shoe store to a TV station. First, he says, "assemble the best damn team you can put together; then outline the goals you expect them to reach. This is a must." Rule 3: "If you've got anyone who is a dissident, who will be counterproductive you must remove him whether you want to or not."

The final rule is the hardest of all, says Mr. Nugent. "After you've done all that, then leave them the hell alone." If this prescription is followed, he promises, the work team will assume responsibility, be innovative and take an active interest in their jobs.

Burns Nugent leaves his team at NAB the hell alone. And he has nothing but praise for the five department heads who report to him. There are George Bartlett (engineering) John Dimling (research), Ron Irion (broadcast management), Alvin King (station relations) and Charles Stone (office of station services coordination).



Burns Quarton Nugent—executive vice president, station relations, National Association of Broadcasters; b. Algona, Iowa, March 6, 1925; BS in government, Harvard University, 1945; service in U.S. Navy, 1945-46; JD, University of Iowa Law School, 1948; legal assistant, Royal-Liverpool Group insurance firm, 1948-51; returned to military service as lieutenant in U.S. Naval Reserve, 1951-53; salesman, WMT-TV Cedar Rapids-Waterloo, Iowa, 1953-57; general manager, KWMT(AM) Fort Dodge, Iowa, 1957-61; general manager, WEBC(AM) Duluth, Minn., 1961-66; vice president, WMT-TV Inc., 1964-67; director, Channel 10 Inc. (licensee of WDIO-TV Duluth, Minn., 47%-owned by WMT-TV Inc.) and president and director of GBAZ TV Cable Co., Grand Rapids, Minn. (50%-owned by WMT-TV Inc.), 1966-67; vice president and general manager, Blackhawk Broadcasting Co. stations (KWWL-AM-FM Waterloo, KWWL-TV Waterloo-Grand Rapids, and KLWW-[AM] Cedar Rapids, both Iowa), 1967-72; executive vice president, station relations, NAB, May 1972 to present; m. Joan Foster, 1952; children: Lelia Ann, 20, and Peter Burns, 18.

In addition to setting priorities for and generally supervising the activities of those five departments, Mr. Nugent is responsible for seeing to it that the association pursues an aggressive campaign in seeking more NAB members and more subscribers to the television and radio codes. Membership recruiting is handled out of the station-relations department, with six regional managers providing the leg work.

Code-subscription recruitment is the responsibility of Richard Wartell, a former regional manager based in Shawnee Mission, Kan. Since the beginning of May when Mr. Wartell made the switch from membership to code subscription, Mr. Nugent notes, there has been a 125-station increase in code subscribers.

Revenues generated from NAB members provide most of the financial base for

NAB's station services, Mr. Nugent says, but he points out that TV and radio code memberships provide the real strength of the association, and hence its clout in Congress.

This leads him to a topic he obviously relishes: self-regulation. "If we don't regulate ourselves," he says, "Congress will do it for us. This is why the anticigarette advertising law was so damaging. For the first time Congress told us we couldn't advertise something that is legally sold." Unfortunately, he says, the industry's attempts to voluntarily ban cigarette ads came "too little and too late." He sees the almost imminent passage of legislation to prohibit broadcast advertising of little cigars as a further blow to free broadcasting.

"We're 10 times better off if we regulate ourselves," he says. And he ticked off two recent examples of the TV-radio code mechanism working to the benefit of broadcasters in staving off government regulation.

In response to concern in Congress over the advertising of proprietary drugs, NAB was "able to come up with guidelines and demonstrate that self-regulation can be effective," he says, and the association took similar action when the so-called topless-radio controversy arose.

Mr. Nugent is optimistic that license-renewal legislation will emerge from Congress. "Congress has to act," he says. "[FCC Chairman] Dean Burch himself has said that the commission needs legislative guidance in dealing with competing applications." However, he foresees "a major battle" on antisiphoning shaping up between broadcasters and cable forces. "Even though the FCC's rules are favorable [for broadcasters], they can be changed. And we are not about to let the public pay for what they now get free," he declares.

Mr. Nugent counts among his friends and social contacts a former broadcaster and publisher with whom he roomed back in his Navy days. Although that comrade happens to be Representative Clarence (Bud) Brown (R-Ohio), ranking minority member of the House Communications Subcommittee, Mr. Nugent says he studiously avoids any appearance of lobbying for NAB. That doesn't stop him from voicing his beliefs about broadcasting at other opportunities, however.

Burns Nugent points to the far wall of his office (within shouting distance of NAB President Vincent Wasilewski's) on the sixth floor of 1771 N Street in Washington. "See that poster?" he says. It's an original drawing his wife picked up in Paris depicting the French copy of the Statue of Liberty. But Miss Liberty's mouth is covered by a red, white and blue bandage. "That serves as a constant reminder to me that no one has greater broadcast freedom than we do and we should deplore any attempt to gag us."