



Brian Lilly

EDITORS' NOTE Brian Lilly was educated at Boston University and launched One Caribbean Television in 2004. He has been a WideOrbit Board member since 2000.

COMPANY BRIEF One Caribbean Television is an affiliate of Lilly Broadcasting, a privately owned American broadcasting company founded in 1999, by brothers Brian and Kevin Lilly, with TV properties in Elmira/Corning (NY), Erie (PA), Guam, Hawaii, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands.

How do you stay relevant today? Will TV remain relevant for the future?

Over time, I have learned that it's about service to one's community. It can be looked at as dominating the local community if we give the viewers content they want to watch. I was always proud that TV was a business where people identified with a strong brand. One of the best brands in any market is the local television station. How do we remain relevant? We have battled that for the 20 years I have been in this business. If we can serve our local communities with content to inform, educate, keep families safe, and entertain, we will stay relevant. No one can replace the local market perspective, not even the companies like Yahoo, which have tried.

What brought you into the Caribbean market?

Kevin and I started our business with the ABC affiliate and a few radio stations in Elmira/Corning, New York. That was our first foray into broadcasting station ownership. We put every penny we had in, and we borrowed even more. Kevin wanted to buy WSEE-TV, the CBS affiliate in Erie. I was traveling in Central America and everywhere I went there was the WSEE signal we were looking to buy – at small hotels, nice hotels, homes, and restaurants, it was everywhere. However, there were no local services – no weather services – like the things we're accustomed to in the United States. I met

Serving Communities

An Interview with Brian Lilly,
Owner, One Caribbean Television

a guy who had strung up his neighborhood as a cable system connected to a big dish. The WSEE signal was set up to be captured by the U.S. cable systems, but entrepreneurs in other countries were pirating signals. I thought there was a business opportunity to serve the Caribbean with local programming. This is how One Caribbean Television was born.

What were the steps you took to create this business?

We knew the WSEE signal was being delivered to Puerto Rico, but it was then being taken into countries I didn't even know the names of at the time. I decided we should try to provide news and weather, but make it a fun newscast. The viewer response out of the gate was unbelievable.

The response reminded me of how I grew up with television where the weather guy was the most popular person in town. We were creating the same thing in the Caribbean, but it was about serving a community that was underserved.

How do you define when a station is doing the right thing?

I wish more stations did the right thing. People try. The biggest problem with journalism is that not many journalists understand balance sheets and they don't attack problems. There is a reticence in that they won't go after where their bread is buttered, and that is the biggest tragedy in American journalism.

Are the dollars still there from an advertising perspective?

Yes, and *60 Minutes* is an example. They were on a rough patch but when they went back to doing hard journalism, the viewers came back. If something is compelling and people care, the viewers will be there. But it's tough to go after clients.

In the Caribbean, how do you balance the serious news with having fun on air?

It's about what people really want. People want their medicine – they want serious journalism. Our people don't have to be in suits to deliver it. We do a full one-hour regional newscast every night, and it's good quality news focused on the region and the players there. We provide a healthy balance of entertainment and informative information to keep families safe and engaged with their community.

With markets like Elmira/Corning, is there consistency in everything you do?

The owners back in the day tended to have their fingers on the pulse of the community. When consolidation happened, owners would try to take something that worked in one place and put it in 40 markets, which doesn't always make sense. We have had to compete against billion-dollar companies so we had to be quicker and smarter. We have always had to innovate. The common theme, be it Elmira/Corning or the Caribbean, is the local piece. The Caribbean is comprised of many different countries so it has been about intellectual interest and caring about service over profit.

How hard is it to get the distribution you need?

It's a battle to get our Caribbean network into the United States. Each of these countries have awesome melting pots, and incredible stories to share. I was amazed at how many people would e-mail us from across the U.S. and Canada and say, "I was traveling down in the region and saw this thing you did on Guyana and I want to send it to my grandfather in New York." One Caribbean Television is a no-brainer in New York, Florida, and Toronto because of the significant Caribbean population in those regions. We now need to convince the gatekeepers that there is a large Caribbean audience hungry for the content we provide. Census data doesn't reflect Caribbean Americans, which needs to change.

How much impact has the Internet had on the business?

Ultimately, it's that it facilitated how people could communicate with us at One Caribbean Television. I'm a TV guy. I don't have a ton of bandwidth in my head for all of the social media. I'm a big believer in the big screen and localism. We are the local news source in our markets and hopefully will be for the next 50 years, if we use the feedback from social media and the Internet.

Do you play a critical role when it comes to the needs these people have?

It's great to be validated. The best part was getting e-mails from people when a hurricane hit in Central America saying "you saved our lives," because their own governments couldn't even tell them what was going on. I'm really proud of our investment in the region and the social impact One Caribbean has made. ●