

The Right Wavelength

After taking out the top award at *The CEO Magazine's* 2014 Executive of the Year Awards and orchestrating one of the biggest audience shifts ever, Ciaran Davis is a CEO to watch.

Images by Scott Ehler

Following a major rebrand of its stations, a coup where it scored two of the biggest names in radio—Kyle & Jackie O—and being named the FM radio network with the biggest reach across the metropolitan markets, the Australian Radio Network (ARN) has had an extremely successful year.

On top of all of that, ARN CEO Ciaran Davis was named CEO of the Year at the 2014 Executive of the Year Awards. Ciaran spoke to *The CEO Magazine* about how he turned the network around.

The CEO Magazine: What changes have you made as CEO to get the Australian Radio Network to where it is today?

Ciaran: I've been at Australian Radio Network for five years. When I joined, the company—while profitable and with a good reputation—required repositioning

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and a period of reinvigoration. We made some structural changes, we brought in some fresh faces, and we set a very focused strategy around building audiences, getting our brands right, getting the product right, and marketing them better. That helped to increase our ratings—and in this game, when you build up your ratings, commercial returns come through in terms of advertising dollars.

In 2013, ARN was the number three radio network with stations and experiential platforms in Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane, and Adelaide.

Following the launch of Sydney's KIIS 1065, a game-changing event and the biggest media launch in Australia of the past decade; subsequent rebranding of the Pure Gold Network; acquisition of 96FM in Perth; and the recent launch of the national KIIS Network, in 2015 ARN is the number one FM national radio

network with stations in the five capital cities—the KIIS Network, Pure Gold, iHeartRadio, the Edge, and 96FM Perth.

ARN has firmly secured its position as a contemporary media company offering clients powerful platforms like radio, experiential, digital, social, iHeartRadio—a music streaming platform—and strategic partnerships with agencies and businesses including iNC Digital Media and content marketers Emotive, to reach some of Australia's most valuable audiences.

The tremendous support we had from the board was that we would reinvest back in the business to make sure that we continue to grow ratings and continue to attract and retain the best talent in Australia. We also then invested around other products and services and a digital multiplatform execution that meant that we were leading the charge for the radio >



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industry, providing more advertising solutions to our clients.

What has occurred in ARN's digital platform to help lead the way?

Radio has a very powerful and strong future in the digital age because the industry is investing and shaping its own destiny. Our content is now accessible across multiple platforms providing our listeners the opportunity to engage with our talent and our brands anytime, anywhere.

In 2013 we launched iHeartRadio, a content marketing platform that allows us to reach new audiences and extend the conversations our talent can have with listeners. It offers us new solutions for advertising clients as well and gives us insight into who our listeners are, what interests them, what music they listen to, and also, in many respects, it means radio is dictating its digital future. We see that the world is migrating to digital and what we're doing is managing that transition to a digital future by continuing to

provide relevant content across multiple platforms

What is iHeartRadio, and how has it changed the way ARN interacts with listeners?

iHeartRadio is one of the most socially engaged brands in the United States and was launched in Australia in late 2013. The platform brings together live radio, custom stations, and live events, delivering unique content and experiences for audiences. It's a natural extension of our core radio offering, but is much more than a digital platform, delivering new ways to engage existing listeners and new audiences.

What strategies have gone into play to bring networks into the digital age?

We were very good radio operators, but we didn't necessarily have the skills for the new and upcoming digital age. But we brought in people for that. The view of the management team here was that we're better off bringing in digital experts and ingraining

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that digital philosophy and culture in our teams over a period of time through leadership and training. We made a conscious decision to hire the digital skills into the organisation and use those skills to build the culture up. It takes a little bit longer, but I think it becomes much more ingrained in the philosophy of the company when you do it that way. It's an ongoing focus for ARN, particularly the positioning of iHeartRadio in the market; that's a big focus for us this year, and we have some really skilled people and partners to help us through that.

How did you go about rebranding the KIIS Network?

We were very strong in Brisbane and Adelaide, which are very important markets to us, but we've traditionally struggled a little bit in the Melbourne and Sydney markets. About 18 months ago, we clearly identified a strategy we wanted to introduce to the Sydney market and that was KIIS 1065. We recruited, in my view, the world's best breakfast show in Kyle & Jackie O. In the period of eight weeks from signing them, we produced a highly interactive, high-profile marketing campaign.

We were quite strategic about it; the simple message was that Kyle & Jackie O are now on KIIS 1065—'change now' to the new station. I've worked 15 years in radio and I've never seen an audience leave one radio station and go to another in bulk like the move we experienced to KIIS 1065—it was quite phenomenal. We had more than \$8 million worth of PR exposure before that move, in that six- to eight-week period, which helped enormously as well; but if ever there was a loyal following for a breakfast show, it was with Kyle & Jackie O.

What steps did you put in place to ensure this was as impactful as it was?

We had a very tight, talented team who pulled it all together, who knew what everybody's role was. There was a core team of maybe six



or seven people, and we knew exactly what each other was doing. We trusted each other implicitly to deliver, and because of that—although it was a lot of hard work—it was quite a smooth transition and quite a smooth project to run purely because we all knew what the end goal had to be and we were clear on what our objectives were. That was the critical thing. From the moment we signed Kyle & Jackie O, we were absolutely on the same page in terms of what the outcome had to be.

That was not only around the marketing campaign and the PR campaign, but we built a new studio, effectively in eight weeks, which was a huge project in itself. That would usually take six or eight months. We had sales material to get out, we had to educate our clients, and we had to educate our sales teams; so it was one of those great projects where everybody pulled together. We had that one goal in mind: to get them on air in the second week of January without a hitch. I think maybe we took our competition by surprise because I don't think anybody believed we could do it, and that probably spurred us on a lot more.

2014 was a successful year for ARN. What were the highlights for you?

2014 was an incredibly successful year for ARN. In fact, it's been our



most successful 18 months ever whether it's been ratings, revenue, or the introduction of new products and services.

I think Kyle and Jackie O coming on board was probably a tipping point, though there was a lot of work done in the two years leading up to the launch of KIIS 1065 to get the strategy right, to get the other stations right, and to get the breakfast talent right, all of which significantly helped make KIIS 1065 very successful. Much of that went unnoticed because Sydney and Melbourne are such big markets.

Another reason we've had such a good year was the work we did around the rebrand of our Pure Gold network (WSFM in Sydney, Gold in Melbourne, 4KQ in Brisbane, and Cruise in Adelaide). We actually took on two major rebrands at the one time—KIIS 1065, and we rebranded the Classic Hits Network to the Pure Gold Network.

By rebranding the two simultaneously, KIIS and WSFM went to number one and number two FM stations in Sydney and held those positions throughout 2014 and into the start of this year. In fact, WSFM was Sydney's

number one FM station for most of 2014, and WSFM's Jonesy & Amanda were the number one FM breakfast show for four surveys in 2014. Gold has done incredibly well in Melbourne and reached number one FM station also.

In addition to KIIS 1065 and Pure Gold rebrands, our sights turned firmly on shaking up the Melbourne market, and late last year we announced the launch of KIIS 101.1 Melbourne, with Matt Tilley & Jane Hall for Breakfast, and new talent with Hughesy & Kate for the drive home across the newly created KIIS Network. Following the brand refresh of Brisbane's 97.3 and Adelaide's Mix 102.3 as part of the KIIS Network, in late 2014 ARN acquired Perth's 96FM, which will be integrated into the KIIS Network, completing our five capital city offering, and making it even easier to engage with 25s to 54s.

This year, ARN will also be focused on building the strength of our iHeartRadio platform and cementing its position as a content marketing platform, not simply a digital platform. We see the opportunity to grow our audience of iHeartRadio beyond our FM assets into other genres of music and other activities. ●

