

NEWS/TALK/SPORTS

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Tooled For Success

Building revenue and fans with home-improvement talk

What are the odds that two strangers, neither with any particular previous desire to be on the radio, would team up to host a weekly home-improvement Talk radio show that today airs on a reported 150 stations nationwide? Apparently, pretty good, because that's what happened to Tom Kraeutler and Leslie Segrete, co-host of *The Money Pit*, which is syndicated nationally by Talk Show USA.

Neither Kraeutler nor Segrete had ever thought much about hosting a radio show, but they now helm the only male and female hosted national home improvement radio show for consumers and the advertisers who will spend and estimated \$350 million this year to reach them.

I recently caught up with Kraeutler and Segrete to talk about what makes the Money Pit work for stations and to learn more about their growing multimedia empire

R&R: Tom, tell us about the origins of *The Money Pit*.

TK: Actually, I had no intention of becoming a radio host; I originally approached the media business with the idea of promoting a small four-county home inspection business that I started here in New Jersey in 1986.

I joined a professional society that needed some PR work, and I kind of fell into marketing for them. In doing that I learned a lot about the opportunities out there to get promoted on radio and in other media.



photo: Leslie Segrete, Tom Kraeutler

In the process I got a lot of calls from radio hosts to be a guest on their shows. That's really how I started on the radio. Eventually, I got a call from a woman named Mary Barretta who was doing a show called *Help Yourself* on WADB/Asbury Park, New Jersey. We got along very well, and she had me on quite frequently.

When the station was sold, she was out of a job, and I had this idea that a regular show about home improvement could be very profitable. I figured with my knowledge of that business and her knowledge of radio, we could make it work.

After a few years of doing the show together on local stations around New Jersey, we came across Tom Star, who ran a company out of Boston, the old Talk America Radio Network. We ended up doing a deal with them, and suddenly it became a national radio program, *The Money Pit*.

The rest, as they say, is history. We sort of learned as we went along and built things up from there. Today we're independently syndicated on about 150 stations.

R&R: What gave you your knowledge of home improvement issues?

TK: That came from my job as a professionally trained home inspector. I inspected more than 6,000 homes during my career in that industry. My job was to inspect homes

from floorboards to the rafters and to help homebuyers avoid potential problems and pitfalls.

Doing that job I got all this how-to-knowledge. The radio show has combined two worlds for me – my ability to analyze home defects and the experience I've gained doing media for many years.

I admit there was a time when I sort of had that devil on my shoulder, with one telling me that this radio and TV thing had nothing to do with my home inspection business, and the other one saying, "Yeah, but this sure is fun!"

As the income on the media side began to grow, I was able to slowly but surely taper off on my home inspection business. Honestly, being on the radio beats crawling through attics and crawl spaces on a hot or wet day. Trust me, I have seen some nasty places in my home inspection career.

R&R: *Leslie, I understand you didn't take a direct path to your career in the media.*

LS: My interests were really in set design for theater and TV. I could look at any set and ignore the actors and focus on the sets and scenery. I was working as head of set design at the Oxygen Network when someone I knew told me that TLC was looking for a girl carpenter for a show they were developing, somebody who could be funny and not afraid to be on a TV set.

They asked me to fill in when while they were looking to hire somebody. I did one episode, and all of a sudden I got a call from the producers, who offered me the job on While You Were Out. It's been three years now, and 140 some episodes. It's been pretty amazing.

R&R: *What attracted you to the radio show?*

LS: I thought the radio show was a natural extension of things for me. Plus, I don't need to wash my hair or put on make-up. And, gosh darn it, if I want to do the show in my pajamas and fuzzy slippers, I can!

Plus, I get to work with Tom, who has

"If we can teach each listener what's right for them and how to do it themselves, that is really 'mission accomplished' in my book"

--Leslie Segrete

turned me into the most paranoid homeowner in America with all the stuff he knows. After a few months, I have finally warmed up to just being myself on the radio – that took a little while to figure out.

R&R: *With Tom's role well established, what is it that you hope to bring to the show as co-host?*

LS: I want to encourage more women to go out there and try projects for themselves. There are a lot of woman who are buying homes on their own, or renting their own living spaces, who are taking charge of their own decorating, design and renovations. If I can encourage woman to get out there and ask questions and try projects on their own, I'd feel really great about that.

R&R: *Both of you have considerable media exposure beyond radio, right?*

TK: I currently also appear regularly on a Saturday morning show on CNN called *Open House*. I do a segment called "Weekend Project," where I show a couple how to do a specific home improvement project that can be accomplished over a weekend. I also do a 90 second segment called "Home Doctor" on "News 12," a group of six TV stations in the New York and New Jersey area. I also write for Do, a home improvement tips magazine and Leslie and I were recently invited to write a regular column for *House Beautiful*.

LS: Along with doing *While You Were Out* and the column with Tom for *House Beautiful*, I'm currently writing a book called *Fear Not: You Can Re-Upholster Anything*. It comes out early next year. I apologize in advance, because once I let these secrets out, I'm afraid I might be putting a lot of upholsters out of business.

R&R: *What are some of the compelling reasons that stations should consider The Money Pit for their weekend lineup?*

TK: We always say, "Don't just take our show because it's a great show: take it because you can also make money with it." Everything that we do for our stations is for and about helping them profit from home improvement radio. We see *The Money Pit* as a franchise that we give to our affiliates. We try to offer them all the different pieces of the business puzzle that they will need to make money from the show.

Think about what you get when you go out to buy a franchise. You get the menus or the doughnut mix or the ad templates – all of the business parts you need to help you succeed. On the other hand, when you pick up a radio show, generally all you get is a few local commercial avails.

We take it a lot further than that with things like a detailed sales manual on how to sell the show and our monthly co-op newsletter, where we mine every single co-op advertising opportunity in their home improvement business that they can go out and take advantage of.

We also show stations how to sell home improvement business not just on the weekend, but all week long – on all the stations in their cluster. We want to help stations make money and to profit from carrying our show.

R&R: *Judging by the crowds I've fought my way through on weekends at the local Home Depot, you aren't exactly talking to a niche audience with The Money Pit.*

TK: No, not at all. Just look at how the home improvement business has exploded in the past 10 years or so. Today, we actually have 24/7 television channels devoted to the topic and numerous print publications. But on the radio side there's not that much available for stations out there. One of the most unique features of our show is that Leslie and I are the only male female home improvement team in America. That's important when you note that it's woman hands down, who make the majority of home improvement spending decisions.

R&R: *There's been a lot of debate over weekend programming at Talk radio, with many programmers saying stations air too many "weekend filler/ratings killer" shows that make money but don't really attract listeners. Why do you think that the Money Pit isn't one of them?*

TK: From a programming perspective, we are a high listener service show just as we're a high service program on the affiliate side of things. For example, we have a live call center that takes listener's calls with questions about home improvement 24/7.

We call all of those people back, and we either get them on the show to deal with their question or answer it for them on the phone if they don't want to go on the radio. Everything we do is designed to deliver the most beneficial program content for listeners. The show is not an infomercial.

We do a lot of research on listeners. We know what the top 10 topics people want to talk about are. We know that topics men want to talk about more than women and vice versa.

We know what kind of listeners prefer to communicate by telephone and which ones prefer e-mail.

We pay a lot of attention to listeners, and that helps us to deliver more content and a quality program to stations. I'm confident that if you look over our total package – both our programming and our affiliate service – we really stand out.

R&R: *Speaking of affiliation, you've gone back to being an independently syndicated show through Skip Joeckel's company, Talk Shows USA. How did that come about?*

TK: Skip has been an absolute blessing to our show. He's God's gift to affiliate relations for a show. I was referred to him by (McVay Media News/Talk Specialist) Holland Cooke, who is a consultant to our show.

When I asked Holland what he thought he could do for our show, he told me what we needed first was a better affiliate-relations person, and he introduced me to Skip. It has been a terrific relationship that has really helped to grow our show.

R&R: *Finally, describe the mission of The Money Pit. What do you want listeners to take away from the show every week?*

“Everything we do is designed to deliver the most beneficial program content for listeners. The show is not an infomercial.”

–Tom Kraeutler

TK: To offer great home improvement advice and solutions to just about any home improvement question listeners might have. We want to inspire people to do it themselves – or at least direct it themselves. We want to be the owner's manual for your home that you can turn to when you have a problem or a question.

It's hard to get clear and impartial advice when it comes to home improvement, but that is exactly what Leslie and I are offering. We'll give you the answers about how to solve your do-it yourself dilemmas and the information to become an informed consumer.

LS: Because an educated and informed consumer is a smart consumer. With the right advice, and armed with the right information, they can go out and get the appropriate products or services for their needs instead of wasting money on things they don't need. If we can teach each listener what's right for them and how to do it themselves, that is really “mission accomplished” in my book . ■