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FEATURES

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Foti Sees the Promise of Digital

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This is one in a series of interviews that RW will publish this year with manufacturers of audio processors for radio.

The thing you notice about Frank Foti is his passion.

Whether he is preaching the gospel of audio processing in the digital domain or holding court about his beloved Cleveland Indians, the president of Cutting Edge leaves no doubt he believes.

Consider his zeal when discussing new products in the Omnia family of processors (see story below).

"The discerning broadcaster who wants the flexibility and the power will pay for it," he told **RW**. "But there is a big market out there for an efficiently priced product that sounds great."

That's the concept behind the new Omnia-3 processors, priced at \$3,580. Compare that to the suggested retail of the original Omnia at \$8,000 to \$10,000.

"I can't tell you the number of customers who have said, 'Man, I just love this product, but we're a small radio station in Montana or Gdansk, Poland, and I don't have that kind of money.'"

Foti said the product family has grown in two directions.

"The Omnia-6, for the real discerning broadcaster who says 'Nothing matters but sounding the best on the dial,' and in the other direction how do we leverage the Omnia to make it available to everyone."

Energetic

Foti, 44, seems even younger than that. Perhaps his black hair, which he wears long, and his informal attire enhance the impression of youth.

But with Foti, it's also his outlook. He



At Z100, Frank Foti, right, and Scott Shannon, left, joined Kid Kelly when WHTZ(FM) threw the switch and activated new studios in Jersey City, N.J.

seems to have boundless energy.

He started his own processing company after tinkering with audio boxes as a chief engineer in Cleveland and New York.

Eight years ago, Cutting Edge merged with Telos Systems and Foti became minority owner. Majority owner Steve Church also serves as CEO of Cutting Edge.

The company also makes phone hybrids, codecs and Internet products.

"I'm very involved in all facets of the business," Foti said during an interview in his office in a converted factory in Cleveland's old garment district.

"But if we had to get down to it, Frank's day job is in here playing with audio processing."

Asked how radio has changed in recent years, he points to improvements in digital processing.

"A lot of people anticipated the digital processor being the quantum leap," Foti said. "As history has shown, the first attempts left a bit to be desired. ... The feedback to us, before we introduced our product, was that 'It works, it doesn't sound bad, but boy, my analog box still sounds better.' ... We've seen digital move forward. The feedback (since) has been

that we've at least matched analog performance, if not exceeded it."

Foti said some markets still experience "loudness wars" among stations, but that consolidation has changed things.

"Five years ago, if you were the CHR station in town — yes, you had to beat the other CHR station, but it was for bragging rights to be the *loudest* in town.

"Now if you are the CHR station, you may be clustered in with an urban, an AOR, a light rock, and you have to be respectful of your brethren."

These broadcasters don't want to cause sonic damage to other members of their franchises.

"Yes, there are a few markets where you could see people who want to fight for the bragging rights," he said. "I was in D.C. not too long ago, and there seems to be some high octane going on. To my ear," he said.

"I think it probably comes down to a couple of really competitive program directors for competing companies saying 'I'm going to get him,' formatically and sonically."

Claims of success

Is Foti still playing the role of processing upstart, particularly compared to Orban?

"We're not an upstart to where it was 10 or 11 years ago, when it was Frank and his big black cat Vito Corleone," recalled Foti.

"I was building Vigilantes, in my apartment, by myself. Drill-pressing everything, to redo the front panels. It's not that anymore.

"But everyone loves an underdog. People like the Cleveland Indians 'cause they're an underdog. *Cleveland* is an underdog," he added with a laugh.

Frank Foti, the Father of Omnia

“We’re No. 2 with regard to sales volume, total number of units out there. But in the major broadcast markets, we’ve been outselling Orban by a pretty wide margin. That, I think, is a good indicator for us business-wise. ... We’re not No. 1 yet, but I think we’re coming on.”

Foti describes his relationship with competitor Bob Orban as one of mutual respect.

“While our two companies are competing very strongly against one another, if anything I’m hoping it’s making us both better.”

Marketing fight

He recognizes that the marketing battle between the various processing manufacturers has sometimes been a bit, well, personal. But he believes that trend is past.

“I think the marketplace spoke and said, ‘We don’t like it when people come to blows in print media.’”

He also has learned something about the way competition works, he said. He points to the example of Frank Lloyd Wright, a designer of a different type who gave birth to architecture like that at Falling Water or the Guggenheim Museum.

“There is a penchant to criticize the innovator,” he said.

Foti recognizes that many engineers aren’t convinced digital audio processing is easier to listen to than analog, especially in loudness situations — that they think digital is less forgiving. He says those opinions pre-date the Omnia.

“High-end sounded like a ball peen hammer going through shattering glass,” he said of earlier digital processors.

“If you go out and get the greatest op amp and misapply it, it’s not going to give you great performance. You’re going to get oscillations, you’re going to get distortion.

“The same thing in digital. There’s certain aspects about final limiting that if you’re not totally aware of what’s going on in the digital system, you can generate aliasing distortion dynamically,” he said.

“We did overcome that. We are probably the first, and possibly the only, ones to overcome it. I would imagine that there are people out there who still have a bad taste in their mouth, who were probably burned once, twice, three times with supposed software updates of other products, that still did not deliver. ...

Foti tells fellow engineers to become friends with their program directors.

“Digital-based processing got a bad name, not because of the technology, (but) because of it was a great technology that was misapplied.”

Foti likes the idea of letting engineers access the digital signal processing resources in his products, and applying them as they see fit.

The Omnia ‘flavor’

“Sure, there can always be the Omnia ‘flavor’ of processing, but within the same architecture, there can be a design based upon another person’s idea, and they might not be related to our company,” he said.

For example, the Omnia.hot module was designed in collaboration with Paul Sanchez and Mike Guidotti; the Omnia.veris was a collaboration of two engineers at Swedish Radio and Foti.

Foti says he has been lucky to work with two or three legendary programmers who cared a lot about their sound: John Gorman at Cleveland’s WMMS(FM) in the 1970s and Scott Shannon at WHTZ(FM) in New York in the 1980s.

“They’re not going to talk to you in dBs

and compression ratios and attack-and-release times. They’re going to say, ‘Hey, man. It ain’t loud enough, give me more punch, man. It ain’t cutting through. My baby DJs, they can’t hear themselves.’”

Foti tells his fellow engineers to become pals with their program directors and educate them.

“Scott Shannon always used say to me, ‘Franco, just give me the tool, man. My baby DJs only know how to push buttons and talk on their radios. You give me the tool to paint the canvas, and I’ll make us No. 1.’ The record shows we did do that.”

Another mentor and friend is Jim Somich, with whom Foti worked at Malrite Communications, and from whom he learned the art and desire of tinkering.

“The first piece I started modifying, that became part of our arsenal, if you will, was an Aphex Model 700. Those modifications actually became the first Cutting Edge product known as the Vigilante.”

His early efforts only excited him more.

“Wow, you could make a difference — a little bit of ingenuity and a respect for the scientific side — it was pretty exciting.

“Audio processing, we can’t totally define it as just a set of mathematical equations ... it’s how that is applied in a very subjective way. It could be 50 percent science and math, and the other 50 percent black magic.”