

RBDS shoots for top 25 markets by spring

City by city, technology that produces digital readouts via FM subcarrier makes its debut

By Donna Petrozzello

After visiting broadcasters in San Francisco, Philadelphia and Chicago earlier this year, officials with the Electronic Industries Association have targeted the nation's top two radio markets to introduce the radio broadcasting data system (RBDS) technology next.

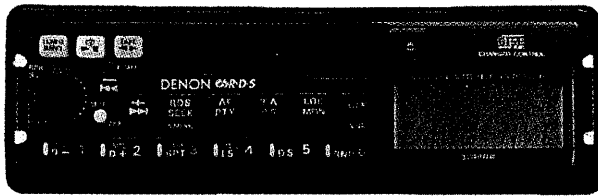
EIA last week visited Los Angeles and plans to visit New York broadcasters the week of July 24. RBDS technology, which allows FM stations to transmit messages via an FM subcarrier on a digital readout to specially equipped home and car stereo receivers, is not thought to have a wide consumer audience because the receivers have not been widely marketed. But some broadcasters are betting that soon will change.

"It's the wave of the future," says KTWV(FM) Los Angeles engineer Dow Jones. Like other commercial FM stations equipped with RBDS technology, KTWV is using the service, broadcasting only its slogan, "The Wave," via RBDS. Once the system is more widespread, many stations plan to expand their RBDS broadcasts to include information about advertisers, traffic, news, events and song titles.

WWDB(FM) Philadelphia sends out its slogan, "Talkradio," its call letters and the names of its shows and hosts via RBDS. WWDB Chief Engineer Chris Sarris says the station considers RBDS "a promotional device rather than a money-making device" at the moment.

KPCC(FM) Pasadena, Calif., broadcasts its call letters and announcements of upcoming shows and songs via RBDS. KPCC, an affiliate of National Public Radio programming, gained access to RBDS several months ago through an arrangement between NPR and EIA.

NPR hopes to broadcast nationwide via RBDS the call letters of its affiliates in different markets so that motorists with RBDS car receivers can find NPR affiliates in unfamiliar markets. KPCC Chief Engineer Larry Tefeteller hopes the station's RBDS capability will help it to be more recognizable to motorists as the market's public



Denon's car audio system with RBDS; the display shows station slogan and city

radio affiliate.

For commercial FM stations, EIA provides stations with an encoder and radio capable of transmitting their message; in return, EIA asks stations to turn over \$5,000 worth of advertising inventory that EIA uses to explain and promote RBDS on the air.

EIA first approached stations in San Francisco, Philadelphia and Chicago touting the service last April, and stations in each market have signed on. Within the past few weeks, stations in Boston, Cleveland, Washington and Minneapolis also have taken on RBDS.

Some 250 FM stations have signed on to the service; according to EIA's Lisa Fasold. EIA hopes to sign each FM station in the top 25 radio markets by March 1996, which will make RBDS accessible by 85% of the coun-

try's FM station listeners, Fasold says.

While not speculating on whether EIA will meet that goal, station engineers are optimistic that consumers will embrace RBDS.

Denon Electronics has sold 80,000 of its premier RBDS-

compatible home stereo tuners since their introduction in 1991, and the company has developed six models of in-dash RBDS-capable car receivers, says Denon Marketing Manager John Casey. In September, Denon will release a combination tuner/pre-amp processor, the "AVP 8000," which will broadcast an RBDS message on a home TV screen.

Delco Electronics Corp. last spring introduced an RBDS car radio available through GM car dealers, and in January established a toll-free number through which consumers can order RBDS receivers. JVC Electronics has developed the technology to handle RBDS and has manufactured RBDS products in Europe, but has not made plans to introduce RBDS products into the U.S. market.

WNEW: a new alternative

Since debuting a rock format in 1967, WNEW(FM) has been regarded as New York's historic rock station. But on July 7, reacting to strong competition from classic rock and hard-rock newcomers, the station changed its format from mainstream AOR to alternative rock. WNEW's ratings during the past five Arbitron ratings periods have been stagnant, at an average 2.3 share among listeners 12 and older, placing the station behind its staunchest competitor, classic rock WXRK(FM).

WNEW Program Director Ted Edwards says that regardless of any minor improvements the station made to its format, "the ratings weren't growing."

Research showed that "an alternative station was needed" to fill "an obvious hole" in the rock format in New York, Edwards says. The station devised a playlist that emphasizes popular rock bands of the 1980s and 1990s, more female artists and a handful of traditional rock artists that listeners consider as "inherently creative."

"It needed to be adult and it needed to be rock because we felt the heritage of WNEW was too important to leave behind," Edwards says. "We found people in New York who were very passionate about alternative rock who weren't being served."

—DP

WNEW-FM
102.7