

Publisher's Profile

By Erica Farber



DEAN SORENSON

President & Chairman of the Board, Sorenson Broadcasting Corp.;
President, Eternal Broadcasting and Sorenson Southeast

Celebrating 30 years in radio ownership this month, Dean Sorenson loves his life and his life's work — although he is quick to point out that this is not your grandfather's radio industry.

Sorenson fervently believes that radio's primary job is to be the local advertising expert — and he should know, as owner of 22 stations, represented by three separate companies, all located in small-town America.

Getting into the business: "I was out of school and playing golf with some buddies. They said, 'Let's play another nine holes,' and I said, 'I gotta go to town and get a job.' They said, 'Where are you going?' I had to come up with an answer, so I said, 'The radio station.' I went to town and called Ray Eppel, who owned KORN-AM/Mitchell, SD. His secretary said, 'He's out to lunch.' I said, 'Good. I gotta take a shower anyway.' I went back, read some copy poorly, and he hired me as an engineer and announcer.

"I'd always thought, 'Play the tunes and get paid for it — wouldn't that be fun?' I didn't know anybody in the business. The job really became available because the guy who had been working nights at the transmitter got moved up to the middle of the day, and he moved up because the midday guy was leaving town. His name was Gary Altman, who now calls himself Gary Owens. That's how I got into the business."

Founding Sorenson Broadcasting: "I had been operating a station in Pierre, SD, and a guy who became my best friend and partner for 15 years wanted to run for Congress. I left Pierre for about a year and a half and went to Sioux Falls, SD to run his campaign. He had a Dale Carnegie license, so I worked in his business while he ran for Congress, but I really wanted to get back in radio. I heard that the other station back in Pierre was going through some transitions. I sat down one night at an old manual typewriter and wrote the guy who owned it a one-paragraph letter saying that I came from Pierre and that if he ever wanted to sell, he should call me. This was on a Tuesday. By the time I got home to Sioux Falls on Friday night, my wife said, 'This guy's been calling three times a day.'

"That was Jordan Ginsburg, Scott's father. He was a jeweler in Sioux City, IA and was tired of Pierre by that time. He called and said he'd cut me a deal. Back then we had to hold stations for three years, and he'd only had his a little over a year. I said, 'I'll come run it, but I want you to treat me fairly when three years are up,' and he did. We borrowed \$11,000, and Ginsburg gave us a contract. That's how I started this company, 30 years ago this month."

Mission of the company: "Always make a difference in small towns. We were committed to small towns in the

Midwest — 10,000-30,000 population was our parameter. We help little businesspeople raise their vision and hopes for their businesses with good promotion. We liked always talking to the decisionmaker. Our whole sales presentation was made on the concept that you, the business owner, get up in the morning and dream about what could be better in your business. You come down and open the door, turn on the lights. You've got this investment and inventory, now how can we help you market your story in the community? We've always done it on a personal-relationship basis.

"Nowadays, when folks know you're in the radio business, they say, 'Do you have Imus or Stern on your station?' They talk about programming. I say, 'We have syndicated programming, but we're local advertising experts.' National people tell people there's a new Maytag washer out. Everybody learns about it in *Good Housekeeping* or whatever. But our job is to call on Bob's Maytag Store and help him say, 'If you want that new Maytag, come down to my store and buy one.'"

Differences among his three companies:

"Sorenson is my root thing. That's in an LMA with Waitt. At this point my responsibilities are a lot less, but I'm active in the licensing. Today we were working on a highway-construction project that is trying to screw up our transmitter site. I still do the ascertainment and oversee that kind of stuff. Waitt has leased all the assets, and it's in charge of making the sales. I have a 10-year deal with them. I entered into it on Jan. 1, 2000. It's working good. My standard line about the Waitt people is that they have two things going for them: They have finances, and they're fair and honest people.

"Eternal Broadcasting is Dick Chapin and I. We've got KROR-FM/Hastings, NE and KCRO-AM/Omaha. That's the old 660 where Todd Storz created Top 40 radio. It's a great old station. My wife says, 'Dick and Dean talk every day on the phone; they might as well have a business to talk about.' We're having a ball.

"And then there's Sorenson Southeast. Art Sutton is in South Carolina and other places. He serves little towns, and he trains and takes good care of his people. They stay with him forever. He also sits down with a compass, a road map and a *Broadcasting Yearbook* and dreams about move-ins. When he gets them done, he calls his consultant and says, 'See if it works.' He came to me a couple of years ago, and one thing led to another. I said, 'You need a friend to take care of a couple of those stations for a while. I'll LMA them to you until you can own them and have the funds.'"

Biggest challenge for small-market broadcasters:

"The changing marketplace and the new technology. A couple years ago we didn't know where the Internet was going, and we still don't. Satellite's coming now. The biggest challenge for our income stream has been the big stores in our small towns. I don't operate in South Dakota, but the Chamber of Commerce and Economic Development Committee went to K-Mart in the last two months and begged them not to close — it's such a big part of that community. Wal-Marts are all over, and they don't buy any radio advertising to speak of, but they hurt some of our customers, who have not been able to stand the competition. That's the biggest change, as far as our business side."

State of the industry: "We can't do it the way we used to. Guys like me have to change our ways or get out of the way. I still think we need to be a local service that provides something that nobody else can or will. Sometimes that's the most expensive thing to provide. And the talent thing is a challenge. I get so frustrated with my friends, myself and the business — that we sit around and talk about the lack of talent. There's no choice: You have to have the people."

Something about his company that might

surprise our readers: "We are an ESOP company and have been since about '95. That was my exit plan, and then this other deal came along. There are 150 employees who are all going to be a part of the payday that's coming. Everyone in the company has always felt comfortable picking up the phone and giving me their input. I didn't always agree with them, but we always respected each other, and we had some longevity. People who could have gone on to other opportunities or larger markets really believed in what we were doing in those little towns, as far as making a difference."

Career highlight: "A few of the people we've developed. Two or three of our ex-managers are now running their own groups. A couple of our managers have come out of other industries, and not always on top. They made a change because of economic pressures and came aboard and bought into our system.

"I had a little news experience early on, and I have always loved the news departments. We've got some great, award-winning newspeople. We had newspeople who understood that news wasn't just something that we did every day at our stations, it was a big part of our radio stations — and, our managers would agree, a profitable part."

Career disappointment: "I'm pretty comfortable where we are."

Most influential individual: "My old partner, Jerry Simmons. Jerry was an attorney by trade but never practiced law a day in his life. He always wanted to be a businessman and entrepreneur. I look at stuff we're doing and think, 'I remember when Jerry told us that's a great way to instill that philosophy.' He was never in the radio business, never active in our organization, other than coming to managers meetings, but he was a huge inspiration and caused me to think out of the box. He's been deceased about four years. It was a great loss."

Favorite radio format: "I'm a Talk guy. I want to hear what the people are saying. For music, I listen to the standards."

Favorite television show: "Dateline and 60 Minutes."

Favorite song: "Ray Conniff's version of the old Berlin song 'S Wonderful.' I've got it written down that I want that played at my funeral."

Favorite book: "I'm a great book buyer and library visitor. Give me anything that's a good biography about somebody who made something happen either in business or their life. I'm just now finishing up Jack Welch's book. Every couple of chapters I say, 'I wish I were just starting my career. I'd like to try that on my company.'"

Favorite movie: "Currently, *A Beautiful Mind*."

Favorite restaurant: "The Palm in Washington, DC, and I'll go to a P.F. Chang's anywhere."

Beverage of choice: "Give me a good scotch."

Hobbies: "I'm a history buff. My mother taught me to follow the family lineage. I don't want prehistoric history, but I like the history of the Midwest — that's only 100 years ago. Since I've started coming to the West, I've become fascinated by Route 66."

E-mail address: "sorenson@sbcradio.com."

Advice for broadcasters: "Give our people a chance to help the industry and themselves become successful. Basically, people want to do the job. They want to do a bigger and better job. We need to let them know the vision a little more clearly, not just hammer away that we need more productivity, more dollars. Give them a dream to tie in to. Give them enough training. There's such pressure today to get it done now. We know we should sell long-term, but we have to make this week's goal — we get confused. Have faith in our people, let them in on the vision, and let them help create the vision so they buy in early."