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A Great Leap Ahead in The Great Lakes

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With great fanfare, a radio leader who recently exited what had once been **Journal Communications**‘ flagship properties announced late last week that he is launching a brand-new company intent on acquiring properties across the Great Lakes Region.

Why become an owner of radio stations? Who is bankrolling the initiative? Are cities in Western New York and small towns ringing the Great Lakes ripe for monetization?

**Tom Langmyer**tells *RBR+TVBR* all about his vision, and what is set to begin in early 2019, in an exclusive interview.

**Small Town, Big Target**

It’s a long time coming, but Langmyer believes the time is ripe for radio to rediscover its power in the tiniest of towns — at least in a region of the U.S. he has spent his entire career.

He’s had a vision for quite some time, well before **The E.W. Scripps Co.**acquired **Journal Broadcast Group**— marking a change in ownership at the radio stations in Milwaukee, WTMJ-AM & WKTI-FM, he led as VP/GM for a five-year period.

With a dream based on childhood experience and professional success, conversations began. Then came the sale of WKTI and WTMJ, along with its FM translator, to **Good Karma Brands**.

This put the fuel in the rocket that was all but ready to launch what is now officially known as **Great Lakes Media Corp.**It owns no stations and holds no broadcast licenses. Langmyer is the lone executive, at least to be shared with the public.

But, the match has been lit. With broker meetings held and calls to communications attorneys set, watching “the ebb and flow” of broadcast media led Langmyer to create Great Lakes as a company delivering on two key shortcomings he believes are widespread at local radio in the unrated market, far from the “metro” signal of a nearby rated market.

“I believe in providing quality content to local markets, and this has been a challenge thanks to pressure, financially, and over-leveraged situations,” he says of some companies with AMs and FMs in small markets that have been fighting heavy debt for several years.

“The consumer need is still there,” Langmyer adds, speaking to the simple notion that small-town radio is essential to breathing life into a community perhaps left to wilt in a Rust Belt that is shining anew in many places.

News of Langmyer’s just-birthed business was first made known late Thursday and reported across nearly every trade publication covering the radio industry. As was stated in a formal press release, Great Lakes intends to invest “in local broadcasting and digital media opportunities through the acquisition of local radio stations and digital platforms in small markets.”

One could easily dismiss this as a baby **Townsquare Media**, perhaps, as that is the philosophy fueling the future of the publicly traded company led by **Dhruv Prasad**and **Bill Wilson.**

But, don’t expect Great Lakes to compete against Townsquare. Langmyer says his company will likely acquire a group of stations, market by market, from small-market owners or individuals.

Even so, Townsquare and companies including **Saga Communications**and **Connoisseur Media**could provide inspiration to Langmyer and his forthcoming team of investors and executives at Great Lakes. Townsquare operates in such New York locales as Oneonta, an unrated college town between Albany and Binghamton. The company also operates in such Michigan markets as Kalamazoo and Flint; and in cities across Indiana, Illinois, and Minnesota — areas where Langmyer is sizing up the competitive atmosphere and potential for profits.

**Inspired by Grandmother’s Town**

The sale of WTMJ-AM and its FM translator and WKTI-FM to local business man Craig Karmazin, son of radio industry legend Mel Karmazin, could have easily spurred Langmyer to seek another management job in a big Midwestern market.

A quick look at his resume proves he’s got the skills. Langmyer joined Journal as a VP August 2013 and stayed in Milwaukee through Journal’s sale to **The E.W. Scripps Co.**. Previously, he was VP/GM of Tribune’s **WGN-AM** in Chicago since 2005. Before that, he was VP/GM under CBS Radio for**KMOX-AM** in St. Louis and served as vice president of news/talk programming for CBS Radio. He joined CBS as KMOX PD in 1992. Langmyer’s background also includes consulting radio stations throughout the U.S. in a variety of news, talk and music formats, as president of The Blue Water Group.

Langmyer began his career at Buffalo AMs WBEN and WGR.

This explains his familiarity with the Great Lakes Region, and why he’s building his company with this footprint. He says, “People have to understand the mindset of a region before they set up a portfolio. Size is also important, and this a footprint for which I have familiarity.”

With a corporate website, [Twitter](https://twitter.com/%40GRTLakesMedia) feed and a [Facebook](https://www.facebook.com/GreatLakesMediaCorp/) page already up, Great Lakes has paved the way to an auspicious start. But, where does Langmyer start? Is there a “dream list” of markets that he sees owning?

“It ends up based in large part on what markets and properties are available,” he says.

Langmyer would not comment on the markets he is likely to first enter, but notes that he has had more than one market visit and is far along in the vetting process. He also confirms that the cities are so small that one would be hard-pressed to know what and where they were unless from the region.

Given that scenario, national advertisers may not care about reaching these consumers. For Langmyer, that’s opportunity to be hyperlocal, and to work in markets that aren’t getting the attention of anyone except the local businesses needing an outlet to publicize their wares. “I am not as concerned about national as I am local direct, and providing multiplatform experiences that are dictated by no one but the local community,” he says.

In fact, he adds, “local radio and local digital have a lot more in common with the other businesses on Main Street than the industry overall. We’re taking advantage of being able to leverage local relationships in that way I think is a model that can work and because it’s needed — people are flocking back to these small towns.”

But, are they? Indeed, small cities are getting new consumers. Whether or not they consume local radio often comes down to the relevance of its content. That’s what is spurring Langmyer to take the leap into ownership.

Time visiting his grandmother’s home as a boy in Linesville, Pa., along the Ohio border and south of Erie, is also a big inspiration. Like many Rust Belt towns, Linesville — on U.S. 6 — went through hard times. Now, people are seeing its affordability and are starting businesses, becoming entrepreneurs. Great Lakes Media Corp. is being built on the premise of serving towns as they re-emerge.

“Smaller communities are making a big comeback,” Langmyer said in a statement released Thursday to the radio trade press. “This new generation of people, to whom quality of life and community are very important, are building their lives and businesses in these places.”

Over the years, Langmyer added, the shifting economy and technology had ended an era of localism in media. Today, he believes, “people are once again in search of real community and the greater connection that comes with being a part of a ‘place.’  Local media builds that connection — particularly in smaller markets.”

Hopefully, investors and brokers — and others who are interested in specific markets — share Langmyer’s vision.

“When you look at that small town in Western Pennsylvania, where my grandmother lived, you get to know the people, and get to know the town,” Langmyer tells *RBR+TVBR*. “It was a vibrant town and that went away, and with that came problems. But what’s happening is now is people are coming back because they had a parent or grandparent living there or they see an opportunity to go back to the future a little bit and become an entrepreneur in a great place to grow and raise a family.”

This has led through community building, 2010s-style. It’s also led Langmyer to this pivotal moment in his career.

“This is not just about a business opportunity based in a perfunctory way, otherwise you will repeat the same outcomes … as with other companies,” he says.

No acquisitions are going to be seen until early 2019, Langmyer adds. But, the conversations are well in place. The business plan is established. Taking a dream and making it real is in the works.

Keeping it hyperlocal is essential to its ultimate success.

*Adam R Jacobson spoke with Tom Langmyer via phone from Milwaukee.*