

Meet the Personalities 005

Gary Hoffmann

Podcast Transcript

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Guest: Gary Hoffmann

Host: Tom Smith

Recording: Gil Perez

Producer/Editor: Micah Palmquist



Gary: I would say find the storyteller who is going to put you in the best light possible. You know your product, you know your service, you know what it is that you're trying to provide. Pair up with somebody or some group that can give words to the story that you're trying to tell.

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Welcome to Meet the Personalities, the podcast where we sit down with radio personalities for a candid talk about their take on the business of radio. I'm your host, Tom Smith, LA Radio Specialist. And today, I'm joined by Gary Hoffmann of the Gary and Shannon Show heard on KFI AM 640, Monday through Friday, from 10:00 a.m. until 2:00 p.m. Gary, thank you so much for joining me today.

Gary: You're welcome.

Tom: Let's start from the beginning. How did you make your way into the crazy business of radio?

Gary: I grew up in Northern California and there was a single radio station in the town where I grew up, Petaluma. And we could get all the San Francisco radio stations, but for some reason, this one held a special allure to me. The, you know, old hometown guy who used to do the morning show would play records maybe twice an hour but would always be involved with everything that was going on in the town, whether it was the city council meetings that happened the night before, the parade that was gonna happen that weekend, the high school football team and their championship run...I mean, he just seemed to be involved with everything in that town. And I remembered distinctly my ninth birthday when he wished me happy birthday. Not that I was the only kid in town or even the only kid that day they had wished happy birthday to, but it was significant to me that this disembodied authoritative voice knew who I was. It made me feel so , and there was something magical about that.

Later on in high school, I got to know the host of the show, his name was Ron Walters, I got to know him a little bit. And he ended up moving on from the morning show but was still involved with radio station for special events, and he invited me to come down and watch the morning show with the host at the time. And it just struck me how authoritative, how powerful a single voice could be in everyone else, you know, in 50,000 people's lives at one time. It's one guy, one microphone, maybe one script of a commercial he's reading, one weather report that he's

reading, one song that he's introducing, but he's impacting that many people all at once, it was just poetic to me.

Tom: And you'd never met him prior to later on in life? So when he introduced or when he wished you a happy birthday, you never...

Gary: No, no. It was just a thing where the parents would call early in the morning, "Hey, could you wish my son...during the birthday time, wish my son, he'll be nine," you know, and he would go through this list of names and we would just sit there, my sisters and I, would we would eerily await that guy, the big voice guy, saying our names and that it's our birthday and I'm nine today. He knows me. It was great.

Tom: So greatly impacted very early on, did you then, at one point say, "This is what I wanna do."

Gary: Well, I crapped out of my baseball career in high school, so that wasn't gonna go anywhere.

Tom: Really? Just you?

Gary: Yeah, yeah. I was the only one. But it was but before I went into college, so I would say, sometime either junior year, senior year in high school, I decided that radio/TV was gonna be my area of study in college. And then, from there, who knows? I would've gone either way, but after having experienced kind of both lanes

of that freeway radio and television, I chose radio, for different reasons, but I chose radio because it was a better fit for me. So...

Tom: And, your choice in radio, was it the medium? Was it, at some point in time, "I wanna be dissecting the day's news, the day's events, the things of interest and impact to my community?"

Gary: Well, I would say, behind the scenes, the reason to get into radio versus TV was the personalities. I hated the people who worked for TV. Especially early on in their careers, the younger people, they're gonna walk all over each other to get from someplace like Boise, Idaho, to get to Salt Lake City. I mean they will stomp you, stab you, and leave you in the bar to get there. And there was no bones about, everybody knew it going into it, "I'm just not cut out for that. That was never my speed." But the more eloquent way to say, you know, in front of the cameras or in front of the microphones was, "I've always felt like the people who are the greatest storytellers are better storytellers on the radio than they ever were on television."

There's something to be said about being able to put pictures with a story that you're telling, a newscast for an example. But if I can convey to you that same story only using the words that I have, to me, that's a stronger story, because then you get to come up with the pictures in your own head. Whether or not I'm talking about someone who's famous whose picture you may already have, if they're in a scenario or a situation that you haven't seen them in and I get to describe that to you, you get to use the muscle of coming up with a picture in your own head, but I

get to use the muscle of helping shape that picture. And to me, that's a much more difficult storytelling process but is much more rewarding on the receiving end of it.

Tom: It's a little bit more participatory too, because you explain it, you frame it, but then it's in my mind and we kinda own it together, from an audience perspective.

Gary: You as the listener, as opposed to a TV viewer, you have more at stake, you have more work to do, because you do have to come up with those images. And I think that gives a sort of sticky nature to the stories, you're more willing to or more likely to show up at work or show up whatever destination you're headed to while you were listening to the radio and say, "I heard a guy on the radio telling me this story," or "I heard a host and she was describing the situation," as opposed to, "I was watching a newscast an hour ago before I got in the car, and I remember something funny." It's more likely that you would recognize, remember, because you participated in developing the story, even if you were only listening to it.

Tom: What was the path that you took to get to the very prestigious chair that you sit in now as the...

Gary: In this tiny little studio? This little...there's not even a window in this room.

Tom: That's true. I was referring to the chair that you sit in to co-host the Gary and Shannon show on KFI, Monday through Friday.

Gary: I got an internship while I was in college, which entailed, you know, very early mornings getting up, getting coffee for people at a radio station, a group of radio stations, in the town I went to school in, in Chico State. And they offered me a job before I finished my senior year. After working there, after graduating, I stayed on, did a quick stint as an FM morning show DJ with the crazy contest and the phone calls and wacky hijinks and jokes and stuff like that. From there I went to Sacramento, I got a job, anywhere I could, at a radio station in Sacramento to get that next step up.

Tom: Just market jumping?

Gary: Anything I could do, anything. Not because I didn't like Chico, but I knew that, if I was gonna make a living out of it, I needed to get into a bigger place. So I ended up as a sales assistant at a radio station in Sacramento.

Tom: Really?

Gary: Literally filing things, writing out schedules for commercials. Nothing on the air. And it took a good year and a half before I convinced the program director at the time to give me a shot to go on the air. And even then, it was more by accident. There was a van that somebody had holed up in and the police thought was full of explosives. It was 11:00 at night, and I was the guy who was closest, so I offered to go out...actually, I offered to go out there while I was driving out there to cover the story.

Tom: Good for you.

Gary: So I took it upon myself to do so. I ended up being there most of the night, you know, they shot a water cannon at the guy and he came out and there was no explosives. But it was a big standoff that shut down a quarter of Sacramento, basically. From there...

Tom: Hang on, because that's pretty significant. You're a sales assistant.

Gary: Yeah.

Tom: A sales assistant who happens to be in his car communicating with the program director at 11:00 at night on your way to go cover a story that you didn't have authority to cover yet.

Gary: Well, right. Although, to clarify, I was in direct connection with the news editor who was on duty, who was then in connection with the program director. Had I called the program director directly and said that I was headed out there, he probably would have fired me on the spot. Instead, his first reaction to it was based on a 60-second live report that I did in the newscast at the top of the hour. So before he could say yes or no...

Tom: Whoa, the News Editor put you on before the program director gave authority?

Gary: Yes.

Tom: That's great.

Gary: So his reaction was based on the 60-second newscast or news report I had done ,and everybody kinda said...well, I mean, I had the full support of the news editor at the time, he and I were friends, and he knew that this is what I wanted to do, so he was basically saying, "I'm gonna stick my neck out there for you, don't blow it."

Tom: That's awesome.

Gary: So it was great. There were a couple stations in San Francisco that had called me to have me on, so I came on...I mean, it's a tiny world, but I came on that world in one fell swoop one night in Sacramento, basically.

Tom: A bold move that had a whole bunch of hard work and sacrifice, leading up to that one move.

Gary: I was at least mentally ready for that moment, that was my opportunity.

Tom: Good for you. That's cool. So I'm sorry to interrupt, now...

Gary: So that translates into a couple of years later, I get married in Sacramento, but about six months after that, we decided that it was time to move, because I had been offered a job by a station in Seattle. And it was one of those where, again, you gotta jump up market if you're gonna make any money at it. Second, it was the right opportunity, because my wife was willing to travel, and her parents had recently moved to the Seattle area, so we were going into a place that was at least somewhat familiar to us.

Tom: Perfect.

Gary: So I go to Seattle, work as a news reporter on the streets, basically, for about five years, have a couple of kids up there, and the last year I was there, I was a news anchor. Then we switched formats, I went back out on the street as a reporter and decided, well, I wasn't going to actively search, but if something came up, I would be willing to move. Because Seattle is a fantastic, fantastic city. And the Chamber of Commerce does not pay me to say that, it's a beautiful, beautiful place. But we were willing, the kids were still young enough, they weren't in school, so we were willing to move. And then, Chris Little from KFI, who was the News Director, contacted me, we had some common friends just based on West Coast Radio and some, you know, common people that we had both worked with. And he called and offered me a job. And that was in February of 2004, so 13 years ago.

Tom: And have you, in the back of your mind, always said, "Okay, now I get to spread my wings and actually say what I think as well as report what's also going on." Is that significant?

Gary: Well, I think the personality aspect of it was never really farmed out of me until I came to KFI. Because the general knowledge, the general thinking about being a reporter/news anchor is you simply deliver the words that are put in front of you or the facts that are laid out by whatever story. You don't get into your personal opinion of it, you don't add your personality other than, you know, your basic delivery. And at KFI, there's always been an emphasis on personality, there's no reason to hide it. In fact, it's a great benefit if the listener can identify the different reporters, the different people who are speaking, based on their personalities. Sometimes that may be the type of the story that you cover if you're the court watcher, if you're the one who has all the sources in the police department, if you're the one who covers immigration all the time, if you're the one who covers the school districts all the time.

Those are ways that you can develop that personality, but also the way you would tell a story. Sometimes it's tongue-in-cheek, sometimes it's obvious that there's a PR person trying to pull a fast one on the rest of the public and you're the one who's gonna pull that curtain away from them. There are ways for you to instill the personality and continue to be factual, to continue to be neutral but not completely sanitize yourself in terms of your personality as telling that story. And here at KFI, that was the first time that was encouraged, it was desired, it was brought out in

people and has never gone backwards. All of the work I did in the street, as a street reporter, as a news anchor, all of the research, you know, double-checking sources, that sort of a thing, those all come into play as a talk show host. Because if I don't have my facts straight that I'm building my opinions on, the foundation is gone, there's no house there to stand up. So unless I can make sure that the foundations are secure, my opinions don't mean anything.

Tom: What does Gary Hoffman's typical day look like?

Gary: Since I don't work in the mornings anymore, I don't have to wake up to an alarm, which is nice. So, you know, 6:30, 7:00, whenever the sun peeks through the Hoffman Estate windows, that's when I'll roll out of bed. Some basic time with the kids before school, you know, teenagers they're not gonna talk to me, but I can talk to them. A cup of coffee and then a regular commute like everybody else does, you know. I'm on the road for 45 minutes to an hour every morning. And what I'll do is, obviously, listen to KFI, but I will, you know, flip channels, see what other people are talking about, what's going on. In the meantime, if I haven't already checked some of the headlines that have gone on first thing in the morning, right when I get to work, you know, it'll be 7:30, 8:00 or so, I can do a scan of whatever I want. I mean, the top 30 circulating newspapers in the country, I can check out their websites, some of the basic and important different political websites I can check out to see what's going on.

But based on what everybody talks about, I'll also look at TMZ, I can look at Perez Hilton, I can look at "People Magazine's" website, at "Us Weekly." There are a lot of different sources for regular conversational stories that you may have already heard of. I mean, you may have already seen the headline of what I'm gonna talk about, but my job is to try to find a different angle, perhaps, that hasn't already been talked about or find some way that it relates back to me or can relate back to us, you know, in terms of listeners who may share life circumstances with me, that, you know, they've got teenagers or they have kids in public school or they have an hour-long commute or they like to travel, they like to drive to the beach or they have plans for Memorial Day. If there's some commonality there, I can say, "Hey, here's a story that you might be interested in," because I'm interested in it, I'm curious about where the money goes for public schools, I'm curious about the potholes on I-5 and who's responsible for fixing them.

So all of that goes into how we would put together a four-hour show. I do that, co-host Shannon Farren, she does that, our producer Oscar, he does that. He does it in more of a way, though, knowing us from the outside, he knows those topics that we are gonna talk about with passion. He knows a lot about our personalities and he knows a lot about our circumstances, so if he thinks there is a story that would particularly pertain to us or generate interest from us, he'll put those in front of us that maybe we didn't already see. And then, we just put all of it kind of into a hopper, figure out what is gonna sustain us for four hours, and then open the mics and just start talking.

Tom: When it comes to endorsements and partnerships with sponsors, coming up from the news and journalism side of the business, what is kind of your take on that, your philosophy? How do you approach it, who do you like to work with most? And feel free to pick any one of those questions.

Gary: I would say that, if in terms of a news background and talking about the opinions that I have about whatever news topic happens to come up, I think I would say that my attitude towards endorsements and commercials is very similar to that. If the foundational aspect of, insert name of a product here, is poor, my opinion, if I use it, or don't like it or don't...doesn't matter. If the product itself is strong and I have a positive opinion about it, I think that's the best combination.

I have found that a lot of family-oriented businesses...or how about this, I've found that a lot of family-run businesses tend to be more concerned about that foundational product, about whether or not the widget that they're processing every day is a good product, than some of the other companies. That's not to say that they can't also have pride in their product, it's that those families know that it's instilled in the bones of their family, that this product that's what they're known for. So when they get together at holidays, when they go on vacations together, they can't escape the fact that their family business is something that they have to be concerned about. And I've found that, as a customer of companies like that, they're the ones who I can give direct feedback to and they'll actually take it, they're the ones who will change a business practice based on customers who are not

satisfied with what they've been doing. So it's very easy to endorse a family-run business, because I know that the feedback loop is much tighter.

Tom: I meant to touch on this earlier, Shannon's joining me for Meet the Personalities already, so she enlighten me to the fact that you guys had pretty similar career paths in your college and markets that you bounced.

Gary: Weirdly, weirdly circumstantial. We grew up about 7, 10 miles apart. She's about 6 or 7 years younger than I am, so I had no reason to know her, and I didn't even find this out until she came to L.A., but we grew up about 7 or 8 miles apart in Northern California, we both went to Chico State, we both worked in Chico. From there, we both went to Sacramento, worked at the same station in Sacramento, years apart, both went to Seattle after that and worked at separate different stations. And then, she came to L.A about two years after I came to L.A., and it was one of those small world style conversations where I said, "Hey, it's nice to meet you, where you coming from?" She's from Seattle. "Oh, two years ago, I just came from there." So and then, followed that weird path backwards and, "Well, where did you grow up?" And she says, "Off the Roland Avenue exit, off Highway 101 in Novato." "I worked at the movie theater right there, I know exactly where that is."

Tom: Cue Twilight Zone.

Gary: Very weird, very weird. But I mean, that's fun, because we have a lot of common friends in the business but we also know a lot of the same places. You

know, when we were growing up in high school, we could talk about the same places that people would visit or we'd see or...so. It's weird, though, that we don't have any common friends from high school, because it's a pretty small community that there still aren't, you know, there still hasn't been that weird, tenuous Facebook connection or something that comes up.

Tom: What's your either most notable show to date or craziest news story/assignment? And actually, the one that you stepped out on sounds like a pretty darn good story there by itself.

Gary: [inaudible 00:28:44] that would be pretty good. It didn't turn out to be very exciting, I mean, it kinda ended with a dud. But that was one that I remember being...it was one of those life moments where, "I'm gonna regret this if I don't at least give it a shot." And it paid off, you know, in spades, obviously. I would say, the craziest day I ever had in the business was covering a visit from President Bush when he came to town in 2004, because it was the day before we got an alert that said, "Hey, we have a spot open for a reporter, we have a seat in one of the media vans, if you want it. But it's an all-day commitment. Like, first of all, you gotta send us the information for your reporter so we can do the background check."

Tom: For all the credentials and everything.

Gary: For the credentials. But it's also, "You gotta be up at 4:00 in the morning to be out at LAX for a 8:00 or 9:00 landing of Air Force One. And then you do not get

released...or, if you decide to leave at whatever point, you're never allowed back in." You know. So I get to LAX first thing in the morning...by the way, I passed the background check, I know that was the first question...I get to LAX, and we're out at the west end of the runways towards the beach in a little cordoned off area. The sun is beating down, it's late March, so everyone is sunburned. The bomb sniffing dogs from The Secret Service have gone through every bag four or five times. And you're inundated with the sound of planes taking off and landing every 15 seconds at LAX. I mean you're on the runway.

And at about 8:30, everything goes silent to the point where you can hear the waves over the sand dunes on the other side, because they clear traffic for a good 10 minutes on either side of Air Force One landing. And you look out in the distance out to the east and there's two planes. I don't know what the second one was, I'm assuming it was like a spotter plane or an escort, whatever it was. But a giant 747, all by itself, in the sky over LAX, eerie, comes in, lands, pulls right up in front of us, steps come out, out comes the President. Everybody takes their pictures and everything, he jumps into the limo, and the presidential motorcade is about 30 vehicles long if you count motorcycles.

There's a couple of motorcycle cops in front, a couple of police cars in front, then you've got an ambulance or two, then you've got a Secret Service vehicle. Then you've got the presidential limo, two of them, and you've got another Secret Service vehicle and another Secret Service vehicle and a couple more cops, and then a big armored personnel carrier. And then you've got media vans behind

those, all full of people. The moment the President gets in that car, the convoy takes off. And if you are not in your media van by the time the cop who's behind the wheel hits the gas, you're screwed, you're left behind, they're gonna leave you on the tarmac to fry. So as soon as the President gets in the limo, everybody is booking it, grabbing their bags, booking into their media van, jumping in, and we're doing 85, 90 miles an hour down the 105 freeway to get towards downtown. I have never seen any freeway in Los Angeles clear. It was clear, every exit was blocked, every on-ramp blocked by at least two motor cops.

So we get down to the convention center in L.A., everybody runs out of the van, we run up to the media positioning, and he jumps in, gives the speech, quick 15, 20 minute speech to whichever gathering it was. And he gets back in the limo, we all have to run 150, 200 yards to get to the media vans, drive downtown, and they put us...I believe we were in the Biltmore at the time. So the President's in the Biltmore, we're in the Biltmore, Secret Service all over the place. And at that point, the majority of my day was done, it's probably 3:00 or 4:00 in the afternoon by then. But I'm exhausted, I'm running completely on exhilaration at that point, and endorphins, because this is really flipping cool. And somebody brought in an in and out truck on the side of the street. All the members of the media, we walked downstairs and the free hamburgers and fries and shakes for everybody. And it was just unbelievable.

I remember getting home that night, he had given one more speech, and after that we were free to go. One of the guys from the newsroom came and picked me up

down from the Masonic Hall, I believe, somewhere in South L.A., and drove me back to the station, I got in the car and drove home. And I just remember being amazed, like, "I just did something no one gets to do. No one gets to ride around with the President, you know, for a day." And it was amazing to see a couple of things, I love the whole background, security apparatus, Air Force One, the planes that come in beforehand, the helicopters that are delivered. I loved all that. But it was an absolute blast. That was probably my favorite day.

Tom: What was your first concert?

Gary: First concert that I paid for or that I went to?

Tom: First concert you went to. Doesn't matter you paid for it, your parents brought you, or what have you.

Gary: It's embarrassing.

Tom: It always is.

Gary: Sheena Easton was the headliner, and Atlantic Star was the opener.

Tom: That is embarrassing.

Tom: Parting advice for prospective sponsors, partners.

Gary: I would say, be judicious in the use of personalities, but find that story teller who's going to be able to...I would say this, I would say find the storyteller who is going to put you in the best light possible. You know your product, you know your service, you know what it is that you're trying to provide. Pair up with somebody or some group that can give words to the story that you're trying to tell, with the product or service that you're trying to provide.

Tom: All right. Gary Hoffman, thank you so much. The show is Gary and Shannon on KFI AM 640 here in the Los Angeles market. Monday through Friday from 10 a.m. till 2 p.m. That was Gary Hoffman's take on the business of radio. This is Meet the Personalities, I'm Tom Smith, thank you very much, until next time.

This episode of Meet the Personalities was recorded by Gil Perez. It was produced and engineered by Micah Palmquist.

Tom: Meet the Personalities is brought to you by LA Radio Specialist. Learn more about working with the very personalities you hear from within these podcasts at LARadioSpecialist.com. LARadioSpecialist.com, impactful marketing programs driven by influential personalities and the power of sound.