

Emmis Communications: Delivering a Command Performance

03

Large Companies

By Tom Schuman

Some organizations have statements touting their mission or vision. Others have values or philosophies they strive to emulate.

At Emmis Communications, the guiding force is the Eleven Commandments. Company CEO Jeff Smulyan wrote the first 10 on the back of a napkin while in the process of starting the company in 1980. The final commandment – admit your mistakes – came after his short tenure as owner of the Seattle Mariners baseball team.



Asked about influences on his career, Smulyan cites life experiences. “I never had a class in business. If I had actually gotten my MBA instead of being a history and telecommunications major, I probably would have understood there was too much risk in starting a business. I always had a dream of what I wanted a company I owned to be, and 25 years later it’s just astounding.”

Smulyan and his team have built one of the largest and most respected media organizations in the country. In an industry that traditionally keeps realtors and movers happy due to the frequent job changes, Emmis is known as a “destination company,” according to Kate Snedeker, director of media and investor relations.

Among the Emmis (Hebrew for truth) traditions:

- Elegant silver and gold watches presented to employees who have achieved 10 and 20 years of service, respectively. More than 120 of the 10-year anniversary celebrations have taken place
- “Have fun – don’t take this too seriously” is the eighth commandment. That includes managers cooking hot dogs for all employees and a prettiest flower box competition to Christmas carols and the “Emmis 500” remote-control car race
- All new employees receiving a share of Emmis stock. Even more important than the financial value (with many more opportunities to gain additional stock) is the symbolic nature of being part of the team with all moving forward together
- A benefits program that exceeds industry norms, scholarship offerings that extend to family members and matching grants for employees’ favorite charitable organizations
- A focus on diversity beyond it “being the right thing to do. Show me an organization that excludes large numbers of people,” Smulyan says, “and that’s an organization that is dramatically impeded in its ability to relate to different constituents”

Diversity is critical when company properties include, for example, the leading hip-hop radio station in Los Angeles and a country music operation in Terre Haute. There are international outlets in Hungary, Bulgaria, Belgium and Slovakia. A diversity director works with individual stations in their hiring and also conducts training.

Snedeker notes that the commandments are present throughout the company – both physically and in practice. The results include strong employee feedback and awards recognizing ethical practices, outstanding community service and more.

Smulyan, who calls himself a compulsive reader and cites Thomas Friedman’s “The World is Flat” as providing a backdrop for remarkable change, states, “The best thing about this award is it’s based on how people feel about the company they work for. The most important thing is trust. When you tell people something, they have to feel they can believe it. That’s the only way to build trust – be forthright and ethical.”



Emmis Communications

Description: Indianapolis-based diversified media firm with radio broadcasting, television broadcasting and magazine publishing operations. Emmis owns 23 FM and two AM domestic radio stations serving the nation’s largest markets of New York, Los Angeles and Chicago, as well as Phoenix, St. Louis, Austin, Indianapolis and Terre Haute. Emmis owns a radio network, international radio stations, regional and specialty magazines, and ancillary businesses in broadcast sales and book publishing.

Primary Indiana location: Indianapolis

Web site: www.emmis.com

Full-time employees in Indiana: 256

Part-time employees in Indiana: 54

Average salary (non-exempt): \$31,889

Average salary (exempt): \$83,446

Job applicants last fiscal year: 15,567

Job hires last fiscal year: 951