



Learning from Kim Komando:

America's Digital Goddess

Nationally Syndicated Radio Host Brings Interesting Consumer Perspective into Focus

By Laura Oles

As a woman who educates 10 million listeners each week on her nationally syndicated radio show, Kim Komando knows a thing or two about keeping people current on today's technology. She's affectionately known as America's Digital Goddess, someone who offers help and hand-holding on all things technical to those who see themselves as less than tech savvy. Kim receives a thousand e-mails per day, has authored seven books and she's a syndicated columnist whose work appears in over one hundred newspapers

including *USA Today*.

The sheer number of things that require her attention would make a yoga instructor nervous, and yet, if you listen to her show, she seems to have a handle on everything. Questions run the gamut, and in her easy, conversational style, she guides her listeners through the latest computer issues and does it in a way that makes sense.

As I listened to her radio show on Austin's 590 KLBJ, I thought of the retailers in our industry who grapple with keeping up with the latest digital camera models, ink jet printers and the host

of other accessories targeted at today's consumers.

I think of managers juggling employee training, tech briefings and the daily challenges of running a retail store (or a chain of them) and empathize with those who fret about being current on the latest products on the market. I also realized that Kim was succeeding on a large scale where many of us were struggling.

How does she make technology seem manageable to even the most averse among us? How does she convert acronyms into understanding?

How Kim Keeps Current

In an environment wrought with competing demands, cascading piles of new computer products and befuddled consumers, Kim thrives. She simply sees the barrage of products and advances as exciting rather than cumbersome.

"It's just constant influx, which I think is really great for my personality because I get bored really easily, and I can't get bored because there's always something new and exciting coming down the pike."

In her comment is the first tenet of Kim's success—being passionate about what you're doing and thriving in your environment.

"When I look around my office, I see boxes everywhere. It seems every manufacturer drop ships something here," she jokes. Some of the boxes are nondescript while many others have balloons attached or even peach jam included—all marketing efforts designed to get her attention.

"After a while, the UPS man started asking, 'Just what the hell do you people do here?'" Her laugh is authentic and full, and I imagine a mischievous glimmer in her eye. With so many boxes gobbling up space, how does she locate the innovative products amidst their mediocre siblings?

Corporate America to Entrepreneur

While some may look at Kim's success and think she simply followed her bliss and built a successful company, the truth is that she had to overcome many obstacles and personal tragedy to find this path.

Both of her parents worked for large organizations, and she didn't have someone from which to model the entrepreneurial lifestyle. So what led her to go out on her own?

"I never felt as though I fit into a corporation," she states. "And I wondered why I needed to keep having performance appraisals when I was hitting my numbers. It didn't make sense."

The journey ahead would be paved with strug-

gle, loss and achievement. Kim had found herself at the proverbial fork in the road. She had been offered a position with another computer company as a district manager for the Miami area. The six figure salary and South Beach both proved enticing, and she debated whether to take the job or to venture out on her own. "While I was considering this decision, Hurricane Hugo hit. I took that as a sign," she laughs.

Two phone calls changed the course of her entire life. "I was called by the Civil Air Patrol," Kim said. "They said my fiancé's plane was missing, but I didn't worry about it. I just thought he had stopped for lunch."

The second call from CAP, just thirty minutes later, confirmed the worst. The burning wreckage had been found near Prescott, Arizona. There were no survivors.

Kim says that staying in Phoenix and building a business was the more difficult choice rather than relocating to Miami, not just from a financial standpoint but because she realized she needed to stay and deal with her loss.

"I think to go to Miami would have been an emotional escape instead of facing what was ahead," she explains. "No matter where you go, the pain still follows you."

Her focus and diligence paid off. Kim then pitched America Online about taking over its computer section and found the response to be 'overwhelming.' After several successful years, she worked to get her radio show off the ground but found most of the networks were uninterested.

The rejection didn't faze her. She formed a partnership with Barry Young and founded WestStar Talk Radio Network. Today, the business employs 30 people and educates people nationwide about computers and the latest gadgets and software. It also carries about a dozen different radio shows, including launching a new Mannheim Steamroller Christmas program.

"I love this. I found my niche," she says, the enthusiasm building in her voice. "Fortunately, I found it when I

(continued on page 62)

(Komando... continued from page 45)

was 27 or 28. A lot of people don't find it until they're 30. Some people never find it." She adds, "But in order to find it, you have to take a risk."

Camera Phone Follies

While Kim states that she does field questions about camera phones from time to time, the questions are usually related to simply getting the pictures off the phone. She tells the story of one woman who was trying to get pictures off her camera phone and didn't realize that, with many models, the pictures are not on the camera itself but being stored on servers. This was a particular sticky issue because the photos were, uh, nude candids.

"Remember Paris Hilton?" she laughs.

"I get a few questions about camera phones but am also getting into new gadgets that have cameras built into them. This whole digital explosion has got people in a tailspin because they're trying to edit pictures at home, printing them, trying to figure out what to do with them. How do they archive them?"

Kim relays a story about a phone call she received from a pastor in Boston who is making a time capsule. "He wants to know what kind of media he should use so they can open up the can in twenty-five years and be able to see the pictures."

Many of Kim's telephone calls mirror the questions and concerns we see in the industry. In fact, listening to her radio show could give those of us in the photo/consumer electronics industry some insight as to what issues stump our customers. An added bonus? We might even pick up a few new tips for our own use.

Shopping For Fun, Education and Frustration:

Kim visits retail stores on a regular basis in an effort to learn as well as to have a little fun. "About one a year, I take my team on a field trip to help keep us on track," she explains. "I tell them to just stand here and listen. Look at the buyer. What are they wearing from head to toe, how many kids do they have? What are they carrying? This is our audience," she continues. "It isn't the guy who can spend two grand on a digital camera. These are people who are budgeting \$200-400. They want to take pictures when their kids are playing soccer and don't want to miss the shot because of shutter lag."

When Kim recalls a couple of recent shopping experiences, I realize that her account confirms

what many of us realize is a growing issue in our industry.

"I went to a local big box store here, where they're selling about 200 cameras. The kid comes over to me, he's maybe in his early twenties, and just for giggles, I asked him, 'Which one is the best?' He said, 'it depends if you want to take pictures of flowers or people.'"

She adds, "He didn't have a clue about the cameras, but he was hell bent on selling me an extended warranty."

Before we begin the hotly contested debate of



specialty retailers over superstores, I should warn you that Kim's experience in a local camera shop didn't fare much better.

She decided to take her four year old son, Ian, to a camera store to get his passport picture taken and mentioned to the shop employee that she was considering going to Bora Bora because of the fabulous scuba diving. Kim had researched housings for her cameras but was put off by the \$1,000 price tag.

"The woman tells me that there's a new camera that's only about \$400 that would be great for scuba diving. I ask her what the depth is and she tells me it's about thirty or forty feet." Kim requests to see the box and learns the actual depth. Eight feet. The only water that camera is going to see is in your local swimming pool. "The woman didn't have a clue," she sighs.

Kim knows better than most of us how challenging it is to keep up with today's technology, but it is this knowledge that serves as the lifeblood of our business. It doesn't matter if it's difficult; it's our job, and our customers deserve to be served by knowledgeable experts. If they can't find it in one store, they'll find it in a competing one. And maybe looking at the issue as an engaging opportunity rather than a daily burden would help speed up our learning curve and translate enthusiasm to those who look to us for leadership.■