

9 March, 2010

river
THE HIT MUSIC STATION
ABN: 92 083 443 501

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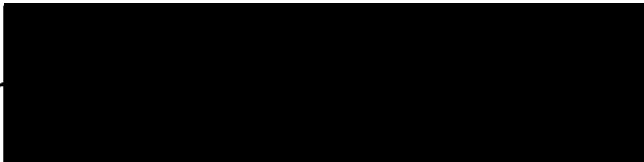


To the Registrar,
Queensland Flood Commission of Inquiry
P.O.Box 1738
Brisbane
QLD 4001

Dear Sir/ Madam,

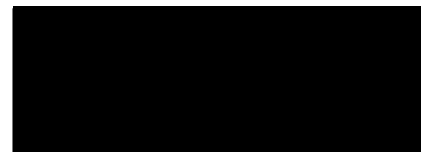
Please find three copies of our submission (plus audio) from River949,
the commercial FM radio station licenced for the Ipswich, Lockyer, Scenic Rim and
Somerset Shires.

Yours sincerely,



David Greenwood
General Manager
River949

Star Broadcasting Network Pty Ltd ABN 92 083 443 501



www.river949.com



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Queensland Floods 'Commission of Inquiry

A submission from River949 FM

Commercial Radio Station River949FM is licenced for the Ipswich region (to and including the Lockyer Valley, Somerset and Scenic Rim Shires).

River949's fortuitous signal also covers Toowoomba and a substantial portion of Brisbane's Western and Southern Suburbs.

River949 is owned by Grant Broadcasters. Grant Broadcasters is primarily an Australian regional radio network consisting of 36 commercial radio licences across all States and Territories and includes a small number of metropolitan radio stations. It is a privately owned company, held by Janet Cameron and her family. The company was started by Cameron's father, Walter Grant in the 1970s.

The owner's philosophy is for each licence to preserve 'community engagement' and to proudly maintain a 'live and local' focus through its programming strategies.

Background

As early as September/ October last year, our long range weather predictions clearly indicated a major weather event over the Christmas/ New Year period. (River949 relies heavily on these forecasts due to the many outside broadcasts and outdoor promotions we conduct within the region).

Armed with the ominous weather indicators, River949 made contact with the local SES in October last year and arranged a full schedule of no- charge announcements seeking additional volunteers for the SES with over 30 new members signing up; not only in Ipswich but throughout our coverage area.

In November, we negotiated with a large electrical retailer to sell battery operated radios to the public for ten dollars each, highlighting the fact that with a major weather event and a possible loss of power, a portable radio gave listeners a communication device. A Community service campaign (also provided at no-charge) alerted our listeners to this offer and the ensuing sales were brisk.

The Natural Weather Event as it unfolded

As the weather warnings/ bulletins supported fears of greater inundation on the Monday (January 10), the decision was made on the Monday afternoon at 4pm to break from our normal programming and turn the station format over to flood information/ updates, involving callers from within our fortuitous signal area who fed us road closures and local updates.

Prior to 2.30 pm, we were providing BOM bulletins indicating more rain/ flash flooding with the radar screen in the studio not showing any exceptional weather event for Toowoomba proper. During the lead-up to the flash flooding, we were taking calls from Toowoomba listeners advising of rising water at Withcott, flash flooding in Toowoomba, water over the Warrego Highway and the closure of the Toowoomba Range due to rock slides. At approximately 2.30pm, reports, again from listeners, highlighted the seriousness of the conditions. As time passed and the rain continued, we were then made aware of severe conditions and subsequent disaster in the Murphy's Creek/ Grantham/ Helidon area. By 7pm that evening, our phone systems (70 lines) were fully occupied.

River949 Connectivity

Over the event, from 2.30pm on Monday January 10 until Sunday January 16, River949 took well over 9,000 calls on our general office number and studio lines, received 700 text messages and fielded over 24,000 hits on our web site. Together with this, we channeled vital information on to a dedicated River949 flood "face book" site which posted over 650 messages.

Our submission is not to be viewed as being critical of the various stakeholders nor aspects affecting our ability to provide information in times of natural disasters; rather to make points which will, in future, enable River949 to be more efficient at providing the accurate, necessary and essential information required by our community.

We simply want to “do it better” for our listeners.

Some History:

Importantly, we recognize that today we are dealing with many media forms. Today, generational change indicates that reliance on emails and call centres to disseminate information is the norm but in times such as we have just experienced, with the limited resources available to a regional radio station, these communications from stakeholders to the radio station and then to our listener are far from adequate. To put it into perspective, River949 was isolated by flood waters throughout the five/ six days inhibiting our main staff from reaching the station. We operated with five people who slept at the station and maintained a 24/7 service. With the incredible volume of calls for assistance plus giving support to our on-air delivery, it was impossible to keep abreast of all email, fax communications considered urgent by relevant authorities. As a general view, there is an attitude that once an email/ release is sent, the job is done. We believe that essential information should be, in the first instance, phoned into the radio station. We received very few pro-active calls from the relative authorities

There was a lack of essential communication from a wide range of organisations. In many instances, we had to rely on listeners to give critical local information. Within the coverage area, it appears that local spokespersons for the various Authorities hadn't been appointed to field inquiry and to provide essential information; the exceptions being the Lockyer Valley Council and the Scenic Rim Shire. In other areas, we contacted Mayors but as you would realise under the circumstances, they were not in a position to give finite details (and on a regular basis) as the disaster evolved.

As issues became grave, it was extremely difficult to get official responses. We received thousands of calls from anxious listeners covering a wide range of issues including ' rising flood water, road closures and bridge washouts, rumours regarding dam breaching, lack of power, medical assistance, food shortages, general calls for help including 'life threatening situations' through to evacuation centres, clean-up assistance, accommodation issues and offers of assistance in services and kind.

Limited official information was available from the SES / Council/ Energex /Police as the floods in Ipswich built and the scale of the event was realised. We even had an emergency services driver call into the station to get road information as he hadn't been able to get it from his sources. In saying this, by chance we came across the Queensland Police Face book site and it was invaluable in providing information pertinent to the region. We were bombarded with calls to say that the given call centre number (one number, 3810 6666) for the Ipswich City Council wasn't being answered, after being told it was the number for all inquiry. We also received critical calls to say that 000 and the SES numbers weren't being answered.

Hundreds of River949 listeners called us back as the clean –up started to say that the Council call-centre had suggested they (the listeners) should call River949 as "they can tell you where clean-up help is needed". In fairness, that was not our responsibility.

We were advised to say that clean-up helpers were to meet at the Ipswich Showground. They were turned away as no one at the evacuation centre knew anything about it.

On the Tuesday in Ipswich as the flood waters rose, despite making many calls to a variety of local officers, we could not advise listeners of designated evacuation centres. Calls requesting assistance from distressed residents started to come into the station very early on the Tuesday morning and it wasn't until some three/ four hours later that we were able to provide official locations of these gathering points. No additional information was forthcoming regarding the parameters etc.

As we mentioned earlier, River949 was working with SES well in advance of the event. River949 offered the services of one of our news people to work from the Ipswich Emergency Disaster Centre so we could disseminate official information should the event occur. This was agreed to by the Council officers back in November. Four hours into the pending flood conditions, our journalist was told by the responsible Councilor to leave (reasons given; other media may feel River949 was receiving special treatment). This took away any opportunity to provide official information. Our staff member then went to the main evacuation centre to see if he could get better information. Amongst much confusion, our staff member couldn't find anyone who would take the responsibility to give specific immediate information and detail.

Over the entire region, power was a major issue. Without it, computers, television and even mobile phones were inoperable, leaving “good old radio” as the only medium to provide up to the minute and immediate information; that is, provided listeners had battery powered radios or access to car radios. This fact should be taken into consideration when communication strategies are reviewed and forthcoming recommendations are made.

In relation to River949’s coverage area, for many of the residents we are the only station which provides clear signal, particularly in the isolated areas of Lockyer Valley and Somerset Shires. Even where there were multiple radio station choices, River949 was the only media form to provide non-stop **local** information as it applied to the South East Queensland region. ABC local radio was having to cover the flooding of the Bundaberg, Rockhampton, and Central/Western Queensland and Darling Downs issues. River949 was totally focused on our area of influence.

We respectfully suggest that the importance of ‘radio’ is not forgotten when considering the communications process. With power outages, radio is the only main voice available. Radio, in these circumstances should be top of the list when considering the important issues of prior warnings, local communication on conditions and particularly on official advice as “what to do in all circumstances”.

Our job is to give people clear directions and updates by disseminating critical stakeholder information. With official spokespersons nominated and available 24/7, it would have made our information dissemination so much more accurate, timely and informative.

In Summary:

- **Radio's role needs to be highlighted to all stakeholders as a primary source of pre-event and on-going critical information as the event unfolds. It should be considered as a priority- a necessity. With its portability and reliability, radio is the only source available to disseminate information when power outages occur and as history dictates, radio offers immediacy like no other.
Car radios come into their own, in times of major events**
- **Organisations/ stakeholders need to have updated comprehensive radio station contact lists. In the first instance, critical information should be phoned in to the station to ensure the very latest information reaches the on-air personnel. E.g. with limited staff on hand, designated News staff could be otherwise engaged.
From the stakeholder's perspective, direct communication with radio stations requires implementation and nurturing as an essential protocol. Radio cannot be treated as a last minute resource.**
- **The inclusion of a local radio station journalist within the local Command Centre during the "emergency period" would ensure immediate and accurate reporting of information.**
- **Organisations/ stakeholders need appoint specific spokespersons who are available 24/7 to provide all embracing information. Regular general media conferences, whilst helpful, aren't significant when radio is handling all matters of immediacy. We are driven by our listeners to provide immediate "real time" communication and pertinent answers to all public inquiry and issues. With radio, regular updates are essential. e.g. Flood level heights and areas facing inundation, every 15 minutes**

As an attachment to our submission, we provide a complete edited 24/7 coverage of all on-air activity over the entire period. It will take you through the initial calls from Toowoomba as the flash flooding occurred, the building disaster in Murphy's Creek, the grief in Grantham, the flooding of the Locker Valley and Somerset Shire, the warnings and the flooding of Ipswich and surrounds. The thread in chronological order will take you through the evolving events and then on to the recovery phase.