

# 8C STRICTLY BUSINESS

## Radio stations get Christmas spirit early

By David B. Caruso  
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

PHILADELPHIA — It's not even Thanksgiving yet, but on radios nationwide it's beginning to sound a lot like Christmas. More than two dozen FM music stations ditched regular programming this month in favor of an all-Christmas-music format, with plans to keep the carols coming until Dec. 26.

Somewhere between 200 to 300 more are expected to follow suit in the next few weeks, ensuring that listeners from Pennsylvania to Dixie's sunny shore will either get that fix of "Home for the Holidays" they've been craving - or go mad from repetitions of "Grandma Got Run Over By a Reindeer."

The changeovers mark a dramatic shift for many of the stations trying them.

Just a few years ago, it was unorthodox for DJs to start spinning holiday tunes more than a day or two before Christmas. Playing "Deck the Halls" before Thanksgiving was considered downright taboo - worse than opening all your presents on Christmas Eve.

But the number of stations experimenting with the format has surged since 2001, and programmers say it's for one simple reason: ratings.

"It has been a proven home run in market after market," said Brian Check, a regional vice president of programming for Clear Channel Communications at WSNL-FM in Philadelphia.

"Maybe it's the mood of the country. Maybe after 9/11, and with the war, people want an early pick-me-up, I'm not sure," he said. "But audience demand is what's driving this."

The shifts, which have happened almost exclusively at adult-contemporary stations that normally play easy-listening pop, have sent ratings soaring almost everywhere they have been tried.

This year the trend has even touched off holiday music arms races, with rival stations angling to

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## Economists predict strong growth in '04

By Martin Crutsinger  
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

WASHINGTON — The U.S. economy, primed by tax cuts and low interest rates, should grow next year at the fastest pace in two decades, but that will do little to decrease unemployment, top economic forecasters predicted Monday.

The National Association for Business Economics said the vigorous economic growth will continue to be accompanied by strong increases in productivity, as corporations under competitive pressures find more ways to expand output without hiring new workers.

That could present a political headache for President Bush in his re-election bid because the unemployment rate is a far more sensitive political barometer than productivity numbers.

But unemployment is seen headed in the right direction, at least, with a NABE forecasting panel predicting the jobless rate will average 5.8 percent in 2004, down from 6 percent currently.

The forecasting panel saw payroll employment rising by 1.1 percent, or about 1.3 million workers, not enough to replace the 2.3 million jobs that have been lost since Bush took office in January 2001.

While Democratic opponents are expected to point to weak job growth as a sign of Bush economic failures, the White House is apt to contend that the stronger economic growth is an indication that the president's tax cuts are starting to work.

The NABE outlook, assembled by a panel of 28 forecasters from various industries, predicted that the overall economy, as measured by the gross domestic product, or GDP, will grow by 4.5 percent in 2004.

If that forecast comes true, it would represent the fastest GDP growth rate in 20 years, since the economy surged 7.3 percent in 1984 when Ronald Reagan was running for re-election.

"We are looking for a very strong bounceback," said NABE President Duncan Meldrum, chief economist at Air Products & Chemicals Inc. of Allentown, Pa.

He said the biggest threats to the forecast are that job growth will turn out to be even weaker than currently envisioned, which could undermine consumer spending, or that consumer and business confidence will be rattled by a further escalation of terrorist attacks.

The report said GDP - the value of goods and services produced within the United States - will rise 3 percent for all of 2003, up from 2.4 percent growth in 2002. After a decade-long expansion,

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## COMPUTER HOUSE CALLS



PHOTO/CALVIN FERGUSON

Melvin Caldwell makes housecalls for sick computers as owner of The Computer Professor. Caldwell, 27, started his company after he lost his job in 2001.

## 'Professor' heals ailing hard drives

By Cheri F. Hodges  
FOR THE CHARLOTTE POST

Melvin Caldwell makes house calls for sick computers.

Caldwell, 27, is owner of The Computer Professor, a full service computer company he built from the ground up. He's been in business for nearly a year, making house calls to sick computers, refurbishing and selling machines out of his apartment.

Caldwell said he never thought he'd be a business owner at his age, but when he lost his job with another company in 2001, he knew he had to do something.

"I could have gotten a job with another company, but I was left with a decision: Do I get a job, start a business or starve. Starving was not an option," he said.

Caldwell took his technical talent and much of his own savings and started the Computer Professor. He doesn't pay him-

self a salary and invests much of his company's profits back in to The Computer Professor. Caldwell said he knew the risks of striking out on his own. But, he added, the job market isn't a bed of roses.

"Nothing is promised and nothing is secure. Companies don't have loyalty to their employees," the Charlotte native said.

When he first started the business, Caldwell said many of his friends and associates had their doubts.

"People told me it would be too difficult. They asked me what would I do if it wasn't successful or did I know what I was doing," he said.

Caldwell didn't let those doubters bother him. With the support of his family and the will to succeed, he went for it.

Right now, Caldwell has two other employees and is looking to expand.

"I'm working on getting some small business loan and leasing some retail

space," he said. Caldwell says owning his own business is more freeing than working for someone else, despite the obvious risks.

"I don't have anyone micromanaging me and I have more control. I make all of the decisions and I'm learning as I go," he said. Caldwell said having the freedom to make his own decisions about how to run his business gives him a chance to grow. But it keeps him busy.

Caldwell says a typical day begins for him around 7 a.m. with a service call. He drives out to clients' home or small business to begin to take a look at the problem with his or her machine.

His day doesn't end until 10 p.m. or 11 p.m., he said. Caldwell doesn't mind the long hours, he said.

"I'm doing what I want to do," he said.

On the Net:  
The Computer Professor  
www.thecomputerprofessor.com

## Farmers urge reform of immigration laws

By Shannon Dininny  
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

YAKIMA, Wash. — If retail giant Wal-Mart can be the target of a federal investigation into the hiring of alleged illegal immigrants, can the family farm be next?

Jon Warling, an apple grower and labor contractor in Othello, who provides hundreds of farm workers for growers in the Columbia Basin, doesn't like the uncertainty the question raises.

"I have a crop that needs to be picked. It can't be done mechanically, so I need workers," he said. "Agriculture needs a work force. If we're going to be scrutinized by the federal government, then we need a work force that's dependable."

The Washington Farm Bureau says the solution is sweeping immigration reform. The bureau is backing two bills currently before Congress.

One would make changes to the guest worker program, which farmers have complained is too expensive and bureaucratic, for workers already in the country. The other would allow immigrant workers a special visa and the opportunity to eventually apply for legal permanent resident status.

The advantage of the second bill is that it provides a steady supply of farm workers, said Dan Fazio, labor attorney for the Washington Farm Bureau. "Some people tell us that if

you would just pay \$20 to \$30 an hour you could get workers. That's not our experience," he said. "Our experience is that this work is really hard and it takes skill to do it. These are people coming here and they've got the skill and the willingness."

According to some estimates, there are as many as 10 million undocumented workers in the United States. In Washington, that number has been estimated at about 100,000.

The state offers a higher minimum wage and a bounty of crops that must be hand-picked - work only immigrants are willing to tackle, Fazio said.

Employers make every effort to ensure their workers are legal immigrants, he said, but said recent federal raids of Wal-Mart stores raise concerns that agriculture could be next.

"What we're concerned about now is, what's the next step," Fazio said. "We have a desperate problem in this country, and that is we have a critical shortage of farm skill workers, people who are willing to do the work."

Last month, federal agents arrested about 250 alleged illegal workers in a 21-state sweep of Wal-Mart stores. The raids keyed on floor cleaners employed by companies Wal-Mart hired for the work.

Earlier this month, Little Rock, Ark.-based Wal-Mart said it had received a "target letter" from the U.S. attorney's office alleging it had violated federal immigration laws. A



corporate spokeswoman said the retailer pledged its cooperation in the probe.

An employer can face civil and criminal penalties for knowingly hiring illegal immigrants or failing to comply with certain employee record-keeping regulations.

The Bureau of Immigration and Customs Enforcement has focused its investigations on industries tied to national security since the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks.

"That doesn't mean that work force enforcement, including enforcement in the farming community, has fallen off our radar altogether. But our focus has shifted," said Aaron

Wilson, assistant special agent in charge at the Seattle office. "We have limited resources, and we have to look at the industries that are vulnerable to terrorism or sabotage."

Wilson said authorities also are more likely to focus on businesses that knowingly sidestep immigration laws or exploit undocumented workers.

"From our experience, most employers are doing their best to follow the law in good faith, and offer cooperation with us and our investigations," Wilson said.

On the Net:  
Washington State Farm Bureau:  
www.wsfb.com