



WHAT IS

THE **FREE BEER & HOT WINGS**[™] MORNING SHOW

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The *Free Beer & Hot Wings Show* is hosted by Gregg “Free Beer” Daniels, Chris “Hot Wings” Michels, Joe, Steve, and Justin. It started out as an afternoon show at noncommercial KIWR in Omaha back in 1997, when Daniels and Michaels were roommates at Central Michigan University. They eventually moved to mornings, where they remained until 2000. They moved on to WBON/Knoxville and then, in 2002, to New Jersey, where they were simulcast on WTHK in Trenton and WCHR on the Jersey Shore. *The Free Beer & Hot Wings Show* began full syndication in 2004 with the addition of WGRD in Grand Rapids. Joe joined the show in 2005, followed by Steve in 2009, and Justin in 2016.

The show is now syndicated by Compass Media; CEO Peter Kosann took on the show just after incorporating Compass in 2009. “I took a flight to Grand Rapids to beg the crew of *Free*

Beer & Hot Wings to become our first long-form syndicated show,” Kosann says. “They bet on me and I bet on them. I owe them a huge debt of gratitude and will always be appreciative for their leap of faith. I love them.”

The Cromwell Group carries the show in Nashville, and President Bud Walters says he’s had a great relationship with the guys for a decade. “We started 10 years ago with *Free Beer and Hot Wings* on 102.9 The Buzz as a replacement for Bob and Tom, who were then top of the market,” says Walters. “No one believed that FBHW could match B&T’s performance. Here is it, 10 years later, and FBHW are number one 18-34 Men in Nashville, just as Bob and Tom were. It’s been a great relationship. We carry FBHW in other markets. They’re great guys with a fun show.”

Patrick Collins, Binnie Media New England VP of radio operations, tells *Radio Ink* that very few syndicated

morning shows are able to develop the rabid, passionate listener response that *Free Beer and Hot Wings* has created in Portland, ME. He says, “They are extremely easy to sell, they go above and beyond to help their affiliates any way they can, and they deliver four hours of brilliant, funny radio every day.” And Townsquare SVP of Programming Kurt Johnson says they are the definition of “show business.” “Laugh-out-loud funny on the air, and seriously professional about their show off the air,” he says. “Gregg, Chris, and the whole crew are the best. We love the partnership, and their ratings tell the story. They dominate Grand Rapids at their home base of WGRD, and they became major players on just about every Townsquare affiliate as well.”

In 2017, *The Free Beer & Hot Wings Show* turns 20. Here’s our interview with the players who make up that syndicated team.



RI: How did you come up with the name of the show?

Chris “Hot Wings” Michels: It actually started off as a joke. We were starting the show up together in March of 1997 as an afternoon show and wanted just to get some attention. So we threw out a few things as jokes and I said, “We could call it *Free Beer and Hot Wings*,” because then people will at least tune in the first time and maybe we’d get some notoriety. We never thought we’d keep it.

And we didn’t think it would become nicknames, either. It started off just as *The Free Beer and Hot Wings Show with Gregg and Chris*, and then eventually people started to associate us with the names and would say, “When are our free beer and hot wings going to get here?” – for instance, if we were at an event. And we would say, “That’s us.” And so then we just finally adopted them as nicknames, and here we are, almost 20 years later, as Free Beer and Hot Wings.

RI: How many of you started out on the show?

Gregg “Free Beer” Daniels: It was just me and Hot Wings that started in 1997. We had been roommates in college, and then we were also working at the same radio station in Omaha. We kind of took some twists and turns. Then Joe joined us in 2005, Steve in 2009, and Justin, just this year.

RI: What should *Radio Ink* readers know about your content and why it’s different or unique?

Free Beer: The goal is to always be funny. It’s not always funny, but the number one priority is funny. We usually get there by talking about pop culture and, more often than that, talking about relationships. Not necessarily dating relationships; a lot of times it’s relationships that people have with their friends, their family, or whatever. Through it all, there’s a lot of making fun of each other and everything else – not taking anything too seriously.

That, combined with the fact that we’re the rare rock show where, to the best of my knowledge, nobody has a substance abuse problem. Nobody on the show is divorced. Everybody is in love with their wife or their brand-new fiancée. Not that everybody who’s in rock radio does that, but we’re the opposite of the black-T-shirt “We got to go out and look at some T&A.” That’s not really who we are. We try to be true to who we are, for whatever the good and bad of that is.

Joe: We are kind of nerdy. A lot of different things interest us. We try to be funny, but also compelling, however we get there.

RI: What kind of listener feedback do you get, and how do you involve the audience?

Free Beer: The audience is involved everywhere. Obviously, on the air. We take a lot of phone calls, and we love getting feedback through e-mail and social media. Beyond that, the audience is involved with us after the show, on weekends on Twitter, on Facebook, to some degree on Snapchat – though we are poor adapters on that.

Joe: They contribute content, and we will also do the show live from different markets. So there they are, in front of us, interacting with us. We will also do night shows that are off the air, where the audience is interacting with us.

Free Beer: Those live shows, we’re broadcasting the national show from the various markets, which ended up being a nice way not only to meet listeners, but also to meet the radio station staff that works their butts off the rest of the year. And we’ve become a great revenue stream for them, where a lot of them sell the tickets and sponsorships. There’s a handful of stations that pay their entire fees for a year with us being in their market for 36 hours because they have great sales teams and aggressive GMs.

RI: The live shows must be challenging, having a five-person show.

Hot Wings: It’s a lot easier than it used to be. About a year ago, we decided to invest our own money and buy what we call a “road kit.” Everything, every level, every piece of equipment – everything is preset. We ship this to the markets, and all they have to do is plug it in. Our engineers set it up so that anyone who’s never hooked up a piece of equipment, ever, can hook it up. It’s fun to do the show in front of an audience where you can get immediate feedback and you actually hear laughter or groans – or silence.

Free Beer: The energy of having 500 people in front of you is incredible. Or 100, whatever it is.

RI: How many of these live shows are you doing a year, and which markets?

Free Beer: We kind of had to be dragged kicking and screaming into it because we were afraid of saying, “Hey, come watch us do the show,” and that natural fear of nobody showing.

The first one ever was with Troy Hanson, when he was the programmer at The Buzz in Nashville, where we just celebrated our 10th anniversary. It was in the Buzz Acoustic Lounge, which was in the basement of the station, and they just opened the door and said, “Come and go as you please,” and every seat was filled for four hours. We were like, “Wow!”

The market manager in Portland, ME said, “Well, if they can do that, I can sell 200 tickets.” And we were like, “You can’t sell tickets. That’s crazy!” And he said, “Try to stop me.” And so he brought us out and we sold out a live show in Portland in 2010. It was shocking to us to walk around the corner at 5 a.m. and see people lined up outside of the theater. We were like, “They must be here just leaving the show from last night. They can’t be for us.”

From there, it kind of started – now we go to Portland twice a year. We’ve been doing live shows in Albany, NY for years. The Jersey Shore, we do them every year. It’s been almost 15 years there.

Hot Wings: A sleeper was Green Bay, Wisconsin, where we just did our third live show. We went from a venue that holds 250 people to 800 in a massive venue there.

Free Beer: If we can fit it in the schedule, we will go.

RI: How much of a role does social media play in your show?

Steve: It plays a huge role, just simply based on the fact that a lot of what we talk about is stuff that we see on social media – news stories that are breaking, bizarre stories that maybe a mainstream news outlet won’t carry. We see them and talk about them on the air,

whether it's later that day or the next day. The people that you're talking to are the people that are on social media, seeing these same stories. The feedback is instantaneous.

Hot Wings: Before social media, you had to figure out everything on your own and hope for the best, and then all you had was a phone call during the show. But now, after hours, people know our show well enough, they will send us things that say, "This is a story you guys will love," or, "This is perfect for when you do your video podcast," or whatever.

Free Beer: Because of that, we've gotten some great stories that ended up playing well on the network that were actually very local to one town or another. Stories that we probably would never have seen, but people said, "Oh, my God. This story I just saw on my own nightly news is perfect for the guys from *Free Beer and Hot Wings*." And so then you get up in the morning and check your Twitter notifications and there's four or five people from Wilkes-Barre saying, "You won't believe what happened at this Dunkin' Donuts in Chamoken." That's an actual example. It sounds like I'm making up words.

RI: What else are you guys doing to push the show out?

Free Beer: Obviously, the lifeblood of our business is the transmitters and the terrestrial radio stations. It sounds cheesy, but it's an honor when someone rolls the dice and puts us on, because we know how important it is to those stations that things go well. That's going to be number one, always.

Being diverse is hugely important, so we've had a podcast since 2009. The podcast became an additional way to not only market the show, but also somewhat of a revenue stream. With that, if somebody podcasts our show, they also get access to a video feed. Our engineer created software that allows – if you are watching our radio broadcast, the cameras will switch to whoever is speaking, and we don't have anyone doing it. We've had a great engineer over the years, Mike Majeski. We also do a bonus segment exclusive to our podcast that people can choose to watch or listen to. Any way we can diversify, that's a huge deal.

RI: So are you willing to put in a lot of work for the affiliates when you get them?

Free Beer: Absolutely. We're a little bit nimble. Don't get me wrong, I'd love to have the problem of 150 affiliates and major markets dragging us to where you only have time to go to San Francisco, L.A., or Chicago, but the fact of the matter is, where we are, we can super-serve. We do all sorts of stuff for the affiliates. We record liners and send them back the same day. We do spec spots for salespeople. We've done sales calls for salespeople trying to close



a deal with a client that they know listens to the show.

Joe: Endorsements. Free endorsements, at no cost.

Free Beer: Even our market visits – when we started out, we had talent fees when we would do a visit for a weekend or a two-night trip, because we heard other syndicated shows had talent fees. We eventually took those out. If station can pay for the airfare and get us hotels, we go. It doesn't matter if you're a big market or a small market, we want to win. It's fun to meet the people that do it, and we want to be on for a long time.

Hot Wings: It means a lot for us to go and meet the people, the staff at the stations.

RI: What is it like to have Peter and Compass Media on your side?

Free Beer: They've been great. The results speak for themselves. We started out with about 15 stations and have grown it to where it is now about 60. Though the first year – and Peter would say this himself, he's blunt – and that's one of the things we really liked about him. When we were meeting with him and other entities that might want to syndicate the show, hoping to find the right partner, we would always say, "Well, what are we doing wrong?"

We knew we were doing stuff wrong. We're smart enough to know that. We weren't necessarily smart enough to know exactly what we were doing wrong, because we were still growing it sort of mom-and-pop style. Almost every other entity we talked to about syndication said, "I think you're doing great, and we'll just refine it as we go." It was clear they hadn't thought about it, or maybe didn't care.

Hot Wings: They just didn't seem to have much of a game plan. Sort of stock answers: "Your show is great. Your website is great." And we were kind of like, "The website kind of sucks."

Free Beer: And so we asked Peter, and he went, "I was about to tell you anyway, but here's my list." And it was a punch list of home improvement projects.

Hot Wings: It looked like a 7-year-old's

Christmas list. It just kept unfurling. And we went, "All right. This is the guy." Once I stopped crying, I knew it was the right answer. But it's been great, and he's been a trusted partner now for going on eight years.

Joe: And we're his oldest partner. And he will always have our backs.

RI: Where do you guys see the show going in the next few years?

Free Beer: Obviously, the number one priority is to keep making the partners that we have happy. Retaining them, and then just growing, honestly. We're all having maybe the best time of our lives doing the show. And that's a pretty big deal after this much time, to be enjoying it more than ever. I would hope that we are still able to be creative and kind of twist what we do, because what we do now isn't necessarily dramatically different from what we did five years ago. But it's certainly different, and I think that's really important as well.

RI: If you had a chance to speak directly to GMs and PDs about picking up the show, what would you say?

Free Beer: The number one thing that our audience tells us is that it's funny and they feel like they know us. They're invested in our lives because they know that on some level, as much as we can be, we're invested in theirs. And that's the number one thing we're going to do for a radio station, exactly that: We're going to invest in you and we know you're going to invest in us. We're going to try to win together.

Hot Wings: And general managers tell us that we're easy to work with.

Joe: Yeah, easier than everyone else.

Hot Wings: It's true. The easiest in America. Bud Walters will tell you that. Pat Collins up in Portland, ME will tell you that.

Joe: Our general manager in Grand Rapids might tell you that we're a little high-maintenance, but we try.

Hot Wings: He sees us too much. We are like his longtime wife instead of his mistress. So we are not as fun for him. We can be every general manager's side piece.