



# The House That Pat Built

Photo: David Cornwell Photography

## Thanks to the **irrepressible** Pat Ivers, AT&T's Denver office is bright, **bold**, loud, **audacious** and irreverent. And **growing like mad.**

It's easy to tell when the weekly sales meeting at AT&T Media Services of Denver has begun: Live music starts playing from AT&T's second-story conference room overlooking the new Invesco Field football stadium in north Denver.

Tapping out the tunes is operations director Mike Sachse, who wears Ray Charles sunglasses, growls out lyrics in a throaty Tom Waits brogue, and, on this Thursday morning before the end-of-year holiday, is producing highly credible renditions of "Sleigh Ride" and "Frosty the Snowman" from his electronic keyboard. About two dozen AEs file into the conference room to grab coffee and pastries volunteered by a fellow salesperson. The songs are seasonally themed, but Sachse's musical contribution isn't otherwise unique. "We have live music at all of our sales meetings," says longtime sales director Kurt Kennedy. As if to suggest: Who doesn't?

The cheery holiday tunes temporarily disguise the fact that there is serious business at hand. The previous evening, the board of directors of AT&T voted to merge the company's cable TV operations with Comcast Corp., a \$72 billion transaction that promises to change the logo on the business card of every salesperson in the room and, inevitably, raise questions about changes in work styles and corporate management. And in a few minutes, the AEs will go through their weekly ritual of projecting next month's revenues.

But first, the proper mood must be created. Working at her home computer the night before, one of AT&T's top salespeople, Katy Monahan, scratched out a skit loosely based on "It's a Wonderful Life," the 1946 Frank Capra tear-jerker. To play the angel role, she recruits marketing director Mason Lewis, who obligingly prances about the room draped in a gaudy fluorescent boa and reads gut-splitting — many of them hilariously ribald — sequences from the script. The room erupts. A senior AE, teary-eyed with laughter, remarks that working here is like "being in a circus, but without the tent." On perfect cue, a colleague dryly corrects him: "We have a tent," she says. The place dissolves in laughter. The Thursday morning sales meeting is in full swing.

The staff gathering is part chaos, part theater and fully

pulsing with an energetic vibe — exactly the way "Ivers," as he is called by his colleagues, wants it. "Ivers" is Pat Ivers, the AT&T Media Services vice president and general manager, who, shortly after arriving on the scene six years ago, took one look at the drab, antiseptic office space surrounding him and ordered crews to rip it up and repaint it in a color scheme that can only be described as postmodern Crayola. Bright red, yellow and blue hues saturate the walls, shouting out to visitors that this is a place where, if nothing else, the outlook shall be bright. It is the same Ivers who, sensing stress levels were getting dangerously high during a dry spell two years ago, telephoned Lewis at 5 p.m. to instruct him to get his hands on an inflatable and comically oversized bowling alley that very evening. Lewis tracked down the supplier at home, and staffers spent the next morning in the production studio, stuffing their managers into a human-sized spheroid apparatus and rolling them down a makeshift bowling lane — an activity during which it is difficult to maintain both a sense of balance and a sense of serious business composure. And it is also the same Ivers who recently commandeered his entire management team, rented a motor home and, during the course of a week, logged more than 1,500 miles traveling from Denver to the Colorado mountains to Casper, Wyo., just to let employees in distant sales offices know they were appreciated.

The trip symbolized the way Ivers and his team conduct business: Keep things loose, keep people surprised and create an atmosphere of possibility. Nervous about the unexplained visit from the "suits" at the headquarters office, AT&T Media Services employees in Steamboat Springs, Colo., watched in disbelief as the mobilized swat team of Ivers and his colleagues jumped from the vehicle, arranged a makeshift tableau of portable grills and serving tables, and cooked up a feast for their astonished colleagues. "Imagine your VP and his staff showing up and serving you chocolate-chip cookies they just baked," says Debbie Curd, who manages AT&T's Steamboat Springs and resort-market operations. "Our staff was speechless."

There are plenty of other examples of the sort of calculated frolic that prevails in The House That Ivers Built. A ping-pong table, its weathered surface a symbol of its popularity, is plopped dead-center in the open and airy sales floor, beside an arrangement of overstuffed chairs where clients often meet to talk schedules and negotiate buys. Ivers once conducted an impromptu job interview with an applicant while casually coaxing her into a game. (She got the position.) The ping-pong table has become a symbol of AT&T/Denver's unique sales ethos both internally and within Denver media-buying circles. When Ivers attempted to remove it, thinking the table was becoming

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a tired gimmick, his sales staff demanded that it stay.

The occasional tap-tap of a ping-pong match in the middle of the day exemplifies a culture in which a certain looseness is not entirely discouraged. "Hey, wanna see our intercom system?" Ivers asks with a devious grin. "Watch." He then yells to a colleague across the room, addressing the longtime associate, as is the custom here, by his last name. "People can make a lot of noise here," he says.

Or not: Other than showing up at scheduled staff meetings, Ivers doesn't even insist that his AEs keep regular office hours. What he does demand is a high degree of personal accountability alongside the requisite sales skills. "In interviews, I tell people I know they're great salespeople. But beyond that, I ask them, what else do you bring to the table?"

The element of surprise is a big part of Ivers' game. He worried recently that the very sort of casual-but-productive interaction his office layout was designed to encourage had begun to wane. Without warning, he and two colleagues spent the weekend tearing apart workstations, unplugging telephones and rearranging cubicles. When his crew arrived Monday morning, they were aghast at the disruption. To begin work, they were forced to settle into new desks, arrange new routines and acquaint themselves with new neighbors. Which was, of course, the point.

It's not exactly management by the book, particularly in an organization associated with the buttoned-down culture of one of America's blue-chip corporate titans. Asked to contribute a chamber-of-commerce style video about the Denver operation for a company-wide meeting, Ivers and his producer Alex Belohrad instead replied with a comical "Star Trek" rip-off, complete with a spitting-image reproduction of the bridge on the Starship Enterprise.

Ivers played Captain James T. Kirk. But there have been more direct scuffles, too. Confronting an unnerving sales downturn in 1998, a superior demanded that Ivers respond with detailed battle plans describing how he intended to right the ship. Ivers thought about it for days. When his boss called, he was ready: He held the open phone toward the newly purchased ping-pong table, where a match was going on. With the sound of the game in the background, Ivers finally shared his plan: "We need to relax," he said. "Relax?" the

incredulous supervisor demanded. "Right. Just relax," Ivers said. The Denver team responded with a two-month sales burst that led the region.

Ivers, a former Arizona advertising agency VP, credits a former client, Jim Hallsey of Smith's Food & Drug Stores, with influencing his approach to business. Hallsey was a back-slapping, boisterous executive who was loud, friendly and loved people, Ivers says. Ivers remembers being a lone voice of dissent during meetings in which the rest of the room would applaud the genius of advertising ideas endorsed by the boss. "He'd take me aside after the meeting and say, 'Ivers, you son of a bitch, how dare you challenge me in front of those people!' But then he'd wink at you and say he wished more people would think independently. What I liked about him was just the energy he brought to work every day."

Ivers has tried to bring a similar verve to the business of selling cable television advertising, even if it occasionally means straying beyond the boundaries his corporate superiors might prefer. "He always did spend too much money — you can put that on the record," says Jerry Machovina, a veteran industry executive who ran AT&T's corporate advertising sales group from 1996 through 1999. "But I think the world of Pat, I really do. What he has, you can't put it in a bottle and sell it. It's emotional intelligence. That's what leadership is really all about. That's what Pat has."

A flair for the theatrical doesn't hurt, either. Aiming to beat a local NBC affiliate to the punch, Ivers and his group invited 250 Denver media buyers to a 2002 Winter Olympics preview event this past summer. To set the proper mood, they turned their basement-level studio into a snowy winter wonderland. As the sales pitch for Olympics inventory from CNBC and MSNBC continued, a trio of invitees stood up, one-by-one, to talk in detail about certain athletic events. AEs who had done their homework on the games? Nope. Each was a member of the U.S. Olympic team recruited to jazz up the presentation with some unexpected star appeal. The ploy helped. Denver sold out more than 70 percent of its upfront Olympics inventory in weeks.

The methods may be unorthodox, but in a business whose lifeblood is its ability to sell and keep selling, there is little doubt that Ivers has created an environment that elicits tremendous devotion from individuals who work there.

In October, 2000, Ivers and his team invited associates to an informal weekend gathering at a mountain retreat — another stress-busting event designed to help people let off steam. As he often does, Ivers used the forum to recognize outstanding performances, awarding several employees wooden plaques upon which replicas of an ocean fish had been mounted. The idea is to thank someone for making a "great catch," or preventing a foul-up that could have

**Research director**  
**Lucette Mercer**  
and the rest of Ivers' management team dish up an annual holiday breakfast to the sales staff. Ivers still sticks to an old mining-family credo: "Always feed the producers first."

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resulted in lost business and angry customers. As usual, there was loud applause and laughter. Later, Ivers ran into one of the employees who received a plaque. Her eyes tearing, she hugged him. "I love this place," she said.

That's not exactly your usual brand of lip service toward the company mission statement. But the Denver Way has produced more than just employee devotion. The Denver regional interconnect was the top-performing market among all metropolitan AT&T Media Services operations in the country last year. Ivers is quick to credit the resilient Denver-area economy. But a big part of the performance reflects the direct influence Ivers and Kennedy have had on personnel.

Since his hiring by AT&T regional VP Derek Mattson six years ago, Ivers and his team's iconoclastic ways have attracted some of the best media sales performers in the Denver market. High-profile AEs like the peripatetic Monahan, a well-known KOA radio salesperson who politely turned down an initial offer, eventually found the sheer novelty of the place irresistible. After spurning the inquiry, Monahan was surprised to receive a couriered package. Inside it was the children's board game Life, and a note from Ivers. "Sometimes you need to spin the dial and make a move," it said. Admittedly smitten, she took the job. "It was all about quality of life," says Monahan, who had won KOA's "Salesperson of the Year" award while ringing up \$1.7 million in radio billings the year prior. "I just felt like I was going to have more fun. And I knew instantly from meeting Pat that the sense of appreciation for your work was going to be measured on a different level."

The hits kept coming. Well-known radio AEs including Bart Gilliom and KOOL-FM's Debbee Cdebaca were next to join AT&T, their arrivals sending ripples through the local advertising community. In a short two years, Ivers had changed the market's perception of cable television advertising from a dour also-ran to a leading TV advertising outlet. In his first full year, the Denver operation generated \$5 million in annual revenues. Last year, sales were \$39.7 million. As for Monahan, the KOA

star who left behind \$1.7 million in radio billings? She now bills close to \$3 million with AT&T.

Despite the strong 2001 results, the year was fraught with challenges. The terrorist attacks and war in Afghanistan headed the list, of course. But on a smaller scale, on-again, off-again rumors of the sale of AT&T's cable operations made people nervous, and a revolving door of senior AT&T executives disrupted continuity — Ivers notes he's had four bosses in five years. Technical challenges loomed, too. In the space of a year, the Denver interconnect lassoed all 11 of its markets together under one ubiquitous ad-insertion platform provided by nCUBE, so that every one of the 65,000-plus commercials it runs in a single day, whether they play in Casper or Denver, are trafficked from a central location. And to top it off, the winter of 2001 was lousy for AT&T's resort-market business thanks to unusually balmy weather. "If it doesn't snow, people don't advertise," Ivers says.

Even so, when he addressed his employees at a year-end gathering, Ivers pointed proudly to two statistics: Denver led the company's major markets in total revenue growth, and its revenues climbed far faster than overall television spending in the Denver DMA.

To celebrate, Ivers and his management team rewarded employees by donning white chef hats and cooking a lush breakfast of omelets, potatoes, bacon, waffles and assorted treats. Ivers, who grew up in a mining family, remembers a family credo: "Always feed the producers."

That, more than anything else, may be the Ivers signature. Ivers knows that economic performance ultimately reflects the vitality and devotion of his sales force, and he's worked hard to build a reputation for AT&T Media Services as the workplace of choice for talented media salespeople. When Ivers pursued his local sales manager, Carolyn Petersen, he had to talk her out of a comfortable job that paid more than Ivers could offer. And talk he did. "I told Carolyn, this is the most dysfunctional group of professionals you'll ever be associated with," says Ivers. "I think you'll fit right in."

— Stewart Schley

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New money is a good thing...



**JUNE 2001 CAB** — The On Target Musical Image Sales Program is recognized as a top 3 finalist in the Corporate Sales Achievement Category.

**DECEMBER 4<sup>th</sup> 2001** — The program closes **\$142,588** in incremental dollars for AT&T Media Services of Salem, Oregon. Coincidence?



For more info  
(417) 335-6610  
[sales@ontargetmusic.com](mailto:sales@ontargetmusic.com)