

## Moses Znaimer: Local Hero, Global Conquest

**ROGER MARTIN**  
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Moses Znaimer has lived and breathed television ever since he bought a television set with money from his Bar Mitzvah in the mid-1950s. In 1972, Znaimer co-founded CityTV, an independent Toronto television station that competed against two giant Canadian networks, government-owned CBC and private CTV, as well as the Buffalo affiliates of the three big American networks of the day, CBS, NBC and ABC.

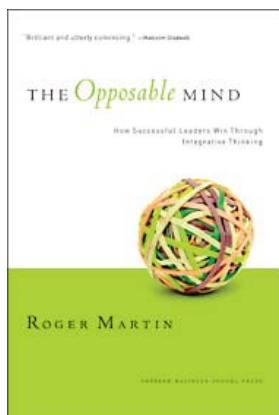
It was a challenging environment, but Znaimer's quirky little station managed to thrive by making a virtue of necessity. Where mainstream TV was polished, practiced and bland, CityTV was funky, spontaneous and idiosyncratic. It featured hip newscasters, fringe U.S. and European shows, and late night movies that were racier than anything the big competitors would dare to show at any hour.

But mere survival wasn't enough. By the early 1980s, it was clear to Znaimer that the competitive landscape was changing, requiring him to make a significant choice. On the one hand, the broadcast media business was globalizing. CNN and MTV were emerging as global brands and operations, and other regional media powerhouses, such as BSKyB in Europe and Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation empire in Asia, weren't far behind. The global players, he realized, could move into individual local markets brandishing resources that local players had no hope of matching.

On the other hand, he saw that viewers still loved their local television stations, which connected with communities in a way that the global players, cable channels and superstations could not. Advertisers were eager to reach those local viewers, and their continued spending gave the local stations a solid economic underpinning, even as the global behemoths grew larger and more powerful.



Roger Martin is the dean of the Rotman School of Management at the University of Toronto.



His new book *The Opposable Mind* explores how successful business people think.

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The apparent choice that Znaimer faced was to stay local or go global. If City TV stayed local, it risked being swamped as the TV business globalized. But the global alternative was equally unsatisfactory. Going global meant borrowing huge sums of capital, making expensive acquisitions with no guarantee that they'd earn out, and finding the management talent to negotiate tricky alliances while expanding at breakneck speed. Even if everything broke CityTV's way, it might not catch the global players, who had a head start of a decade or more.

Znaimer's easiest choice would have been to stay comfortably local, in the belief that going global was beyond his reach. The big players would swallow him up eventually, but he'd make a good living while waiting for the end. But being an integrative thinker, Znaimer refused to accept the slow encroachment of international media players into his market, just as he refused to miss out on the globalization of media.

The love of local media, he realized, wasn't limited to Toronto. Viewers in virtually every local market are powerfully attached to the homegrown stations that reflect and foster their community's sense of values and identity. Local media, Znaimer told me, helps members of a community find "unexpected connections." That may sound obvious, but Znaimer, unlike his rivals, integrated his insight into CityTV's operating philosophy. As Znaimer explains – in terms that might be a working definition of salience – a key to his station's success is that "at City, we pay attention to things that others have chosen to ignore."

In Znaimer's view, stations should have identities distinct from the programming they carry. "Many would say, 'People don't watch stations, they watch programs,'" he told me. "But that's because most stations aren't there. Stations can speak through everything they produce themselves, through the space between the programs. I believe that the character is in the delivery."

Znaimer uses "the space between the programs" to create CityTV's distinct identity. The station's personalities appear between programs to tell viewers what's coming next and why they should stick around. Those personalities reflect Toronto's ethnic diversity better than any competitor or any foreign station, create another bond with the audience. With their regular, rhythmic appearances between shows, they embody Znaimer's dictum that "the nature of TV is flow, not show."

From the start, Znaimer used simple-seeming devices to forge a distinctive identity for CityTV, starting with its tagline: "CityTV – Everywhere..." CityTV's fleet of television trucks are ubiquitous in the city, as are its 'videographers', camera-carrying correspondents whose interactions with passersby are broadcast throughout the day. CityTV's real estate also reinforces its connection with its viewers. The CityTV building is located on Queen Street West, Toronto's equivalent of Times Square. The station's first-floor studios open up to the street, and include Speaker's Corner, a tiny studio booth where passersby can film a 15-second message to be broadcast on air. The big U.S. networks now all have ground floor studios in Manhattan that interact with the local street life. They're copying Znaimer, who was the first to make his station's connection with its local environment the cornerstone of its identity.

Like other integrative thinkers, Znaimer describes himself, without any prodding, as "not an 'either/or' kind of guy but rather a 'both/and' guy." He was never likely to accept a view of the TV business as simply a matter of globalization versus localization, with unsatisfactory trade-offs in both directions. Instead, he has squared the circle by making CityTV the template for quintessentially local television stations across the world. In his words, he has "globalized the science of local television."

CityTV is now a truly global enterprise with affiliated stations in 22 countries around the world. In more than 100 countries, local stations unaffiliated to CityTV license its content and style of presentation. That licensing revenue provides CityTV with a resource base that's not available to purely local players, allowing it to compete with the global players without losing its local advantage.

'Glocalization', as Znaimer calls it, is his creative resolution of the tension inherent in the television business. In the classic manner of integrative thinkers, Znaimer fashioned a solution out of apparently irreconcilable alternatives. His view of what was salient was broader than that of the conventional thinkers around him, and he explored more sophisticated causal relationships among the salient elements. He kept the whole firmly in mind while he worked on the parts, and drove relentlessly for a creative resolution. In doing so, he demonstrates both how integrative thinkers think, and why integrative thinking is worth the trouble.

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**Note:** *On Wednesday, Nov. 28, Roger Martin will be online at the [globeandmail.com](http://globeandmail.com) to take your questions about what sets successful business leaders apart. You can submit your question ahead of time by [clicking here](#).*

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