

## **DTV Communications Issues**

*Steve Graziano, Nebraska ETV 1999*

As Communications professionals at public television stations, you have to explain to the public what DTV is. You must also convince them it's so good, they should gladly pay for your station to convert from analog to digital broadcasting and production. To accomplish the latter, it's essential you be at the table when senior management plans the transition. Many different groups need to hear your message, but they need to hear it in ways that makes sense to them. You'll create different message points and communicate those points in different media. Hey, it's not just a job; it's a nightmare. That's why you get the big bucks.

## **Two Communications Issues**

In the 1930's television was sold as "radio with pictures" and it's remained true to that description ever since. We have to explain how something so familiar and easy to use is about to change dramatically. Many of the people we need to tell this technology story to are not entirely comfortable with computers and will probably be awed by the potential of digital television. But DTV will mean different things for different groups. Just as a 16-year old boy sees a car as a means of freedom and a way to look cool to girls, a 51-year old auto mechanic sees the same car as a way of making his monthly boat payments. DTV will be used in different ways by television stations – and seen in different ways by their viewers.

We have a lot of explaining to do, to a lot of people.

Your staff needs to be fully up to speed on what DTV is and how you plan to use the technology. Whether it's the board operator, the accounting staff or the general manager, they are all roving ambassadors for DTV and your station. Have brown bag lunches to describe the way DTV works and what your station's plans are for using it. Ask for their input, too.

Your board has shown a deep commitment to public broadcasting. They are also well connected to the community. Keep them up to date on all the latest DTV information. Not only can they influence your community's decision-makers; they may also have to sign the checks to pay for the equipment.

Speaking of checks, your members are big users of public television. DTV will change the way they watch your station. Even if you aren't going to convert until the last possible minute (which for some stations is a few years away), show how their membership dollars will be even more important once you begin digital broadcasting.

Of course not everyone who watches is a member (as your Development Director is only too well aware) so you have to alert casual viewers about changes that will soon occur. Even the person who only watches Red Green once a week needs to know about digital television.

There are many people who use your station but are not reflected in membership rolls or in ratings books. These are the teachers who have ITV programs in the classroom, visually impaired persons who use your station's subcarrier for audio programming provided by government agencies, etc. DTV will affect the way they use your station, too.

Finally, there are people in your community who never watch PBS, who don't have children in school or may even have cut out local television altogether by buying a DBS dish. They still

need to know how you serve the community, because you're asking them to pay for your transition with their tax dollars.

Now that you know who you need to talk to, what should you say?

### **Why It Costs So Much**

It's going to cost you a lot to convert to digital broadcasting and it's going to cost the viewer something to convert to digital receiving. Either way, the public is going to foot the bill.

Your costs include transmitters, switchers, tape machines and the rest of the infrastructure needed to get digital signals on the air. The viewer has to either buy a new television or a set-top converter box. When they have to do this is their decision – and if enough people don't convert, the FCC deadline for you to convert may be pushed back. The key to all of this is in signaling the value of your current and future service to the community. Sound familiar? Signaling Value should already be a cornerstone of your communications plan. Now you get to increase the signal because you're increasing your value. Stress the benefits of DTV to your viewers and to their community. More education, culture and citizenship, to borrow a phrase.

Face it, for a single transmitter your station needs about \$2 million. Add production equipment, switchers, gizmos and the like and we're up to \$5 million or more. State networks that have multiple transmitters are well into \$25 to \$50 million dollar range. People need to know what they're going to get for that kind of money. You need to tell them. The best way is to promote what you've been doing for the past few decades. Then explain that with more resources (digital spectrum) you can do more things for more people.

Remind everyone that DTV isn't just a good idea, it's the law. As a federal mandate, you have no choice but to convert or go off the air.

People will also want to know what it's going to cost them to watch DTV, whether it's the occasional viewer of Antiques Roadshow or the school board administrator who has to convert 500 television sets in her district. This isn't an area that we have any control over, but we can be the leader of DTV information to the public. Keep in contact with local retailers to know about pricing and availability and set up in-store demonstrations showing off public television programming.

### **Your Place at the DTV Table – The 3 D's**

Determine Constituencies

Develop Message Points

Define DTV in the Public's Mind

These three D's require that Communications be part of the digital decision-making process.

***Determine the constituencies that currently use your services.*** These groups of people will be immediately affected by the digital transition; they will be the first to see improvements in your service to them and they can be some of your biggest supporters in your fundraising plans. You may already have a good idea of your current customers are. Schools that use ITV programming, caregivers who use RTL programming and outreach materials, social service organizations that have benefited from the Mr. Rogers Sweater Drive and so on. Contact these groups, see how you

can better serve them when your broadcast capacity expands and you're looking for ways of filling the bandwidth. Tell them about DTV and what it can do for them. Let them know you now need their help; have them write letters to your funding sources explaining how much they depend on you.

***Develop Message Points.*** Everyone at your station needs to have the same basic message. Important facts that should be consistent include:

- ⚡ Why you have to convert
- ⚡ When you expect to begin digital broadcasting
- ⚡ What it will cost
- ⚡ How you will fund it
- ⚡ How you have served the community in the past

Whether your general manager is talking to the Rotary Club, you are speaking to the board of education or your engineer is presenting a lecture of DTV to students at the high school, the points listed above should be consistent. You can tailor the rest of your message points to the audience. Legislators, educators, parents and viewers all want to know how DTV will benefit each of them. Don't disappoint, but don't promise the moon and stars either.

***Define DTV in the public's mind.*** Listen carefully to what commercial broadcasters are saying about DTV. You'll have to listen very carefully because they aren't saying much. Commercial broadcasters clearly don't have the content to fill four multi-cast channels during the day. They don't have the data that accompanies their programs. They do have a lot of excess bandwidth to use. It would not be surprising to learn many of our commercial brethren plan to do a lot of HDTV and sell a lot of their bandwidth to third parties. This leaves it up to us to let the public know how valuable DTV is and how we will be good stewards of this resource.

## **How Will DTV Affect Your Job**

With DTV comes a lot of broadcast "real estate". How will your station fill the bandwidth? It's not far fetched to envision a local public television preview channel. Think of it – all promos all the time. Tune in, image, fundraising promos without those pesky programs interrupting the flow. Seriously, there may be times when a preview channel like this makes sense: not 24-hours a day, but certainly in prime time in the weeks leading into pledge drives or prior to your auction. DTV creates challenges as well. If you are accustomed to promoting one channel of public television, how will you promote four or more that broadcast at the same time? How will you brand these new channels? How should you cross-promote them? Have your engineers thought ahead to the time when you will run four station breaks at the same time? Have you thought of this?

## **Conclusion**

Communication is the key to your station's successful transition to digital broadcasting. Make sure your staff understands what you are doing and why. Everyone who speaks to the public about DTV must be reading off the same page. Your engineer can't say a transmitter costs \$2 million when your general manager asks for \$3 million for the same thing. Let your members and viewers know DTV means more and better public television. Let your customers (schools, day-cares, etc.) know that DTV means more for them as well. Finally, look at new ways digital television can broaden the impact of your job.

## Related Web Sites

Here are some web sites that are worth your time.

KUAT (<http://w3.arizona.edu/~kuat/dtv/dtv1.htm>)  
AETN (<http://www.aetn.org/digital/>)  
KCET (<http://www.kcet.org/dtv/index.html>)  
IDAHO (<http://idptv.state.id.us/dtv/dtv.html>)  
IOWA (<http://www.iptv.org/digital/digital.cfm>)  
KPTS (<http://www.kpts.org/DTV.html>)  
MAINE: (<http://www.mpbc.org/Dtv/Dtv.html>)  
WDSE, Duluth: (<http://www.wdse.org/>) “tech talk”  
KCPT (<http://www.kcpt.org/dtv/dtv.html>)  
KNPB, Reno (<http://www.knpb.org/engineering/techupdate/default.asp>)  
New Hampshire (<http://www.nhptv.org/dtv/time.sht>)  
New Jersey Network: (<http://www.njn.net/dtv/index.html>)  
WXXI: (<http://wxxi.org/digitaltv/index.htm>)  
North Dakota (<http://www.pptv.org/tv/digital.htm>)  
WCET: (<http://www.wcet.org/dtv/>)  
Oklahoma (<http://www.oeta.onenet.net/>) digital tv  
Oregon (<http://www.opb.org/dtv/>)  
SCETV (<http://www.scetv.org/dtv/>)  
KLRN (<http://www.klrn.org/DTV/dtv.html>)  
WHRO (<http://www.whro.org/dtv/>)  
WMVT (<http://www.mptv.org/>) search for DTV