

Tulsa Cable: The Making Of A Super System

A great many eyes are on Tulsa, where cable TV sales—50% penetration—are exceeding most predictions for major markets (Tulsa is 57th). The magic came from offering 24 channels. Only six are regular TV

Can a cable system make good in a community that already has excellent broadcast TV reception? The answer is YES—if the system goes all out. Tulsa Cable Television originates twenty-four plus separate channels—half of them 24 hours a day. Subsidiary of United Cable Television Corp., Tulsa Cable, with a sophisticated computer controlled automatic multiple channel origination system and a lot of know-how—plus new, well-equipped studios and a very creative, dedicated staff—has a lot of people sitting up and taking notice. If what's happening in Tulsa can work elsewhere, cable TV is viable in the major market. What's more, with three educational channels plus another devoted entirely to covering city government activities, cable TV is beginning to live up to its promise.

Tulsa Cable began operations on January 18, 1974, and by November 1st boasted a subscriber count of 21,000, with drops being added at the rate of nearly 3,000 per month.

Tulsa's total market is somewhere around 140,000 potential cable customers, according to William D. (Bill) Swanson, President and General Manager of Tulsa Cable. Penetration in cabled areas is now at 50%—compared with Tulsa Cable's projected level of between 37-42%. Subscribers like what they get. Tulsa Cable reports that disconnects over the past ten months have averaged less than 10% of total subscribers, putting overall retention figures at better than 90%.

Tulsa Cable is building plant at about 50 miles per month which is currently peak capacity for the system. "We'd have been a lot further ahead," says Swanson, "but a tornado knocked out several miles of plant in March—one of the worst tornadoes in Tulsa's history." Tornado or no, Tulsa Cable is moving ahead—fast.

Three years in the planning, this new Oklahoma cable system obviously started off the right way. Marketing programs included a massive publicity effort by parent organization, United Cable Television (formerly LVO Cable, Inc.). The direct sales program is centered around a 24-page, full color brochure entitled, "The Magic of Cable Television is about to Dawn on Tulsa." This brochure tastefully presents the extensive services and programming plans proposed to the community by Tulsa Cable Television.

A potential subscriber learns that he can expect 25

Most of the material for this article was gathered and written by Vicki Sagers, TeleMation, Inc.

channels of individualized programming—some of them on-the-cable 24 hours a day; improved reception; and even FM radio, if desired. At a modest \$5.95 per month, plus a \$15.00 channel converter deposit, it seems like a bargain—and it is. Here's what Tulsa Cable is offering:

Three Network Affiliates—KTEW (NBC), Tulsa; KTUL-TV (ABC), Tulsa; and KOTV (CBS), Tulsa

Two Independent Broadcast Imports—KXTX-TV, Dallas; and KTVT, Fort Worth

One Local Educational Broadcast Station—KOED-TV, Tulsa

Two Educational Channels—Tulsa Schools and Tulsa Colleges. Programs produced in studios at the Tulsa Educational Service Center are viewed directly on channel 22. Tulsa Cable is the only cable system currently employing a direct, two-way system between the cable and local school systems' educational studios. On Channel 34, in the future, viewers may elect to watch productions from both Oral Roberts University and Tulsa University.

Religious Channel (automated plus live or tape). A "bulletin board" type channel which provides display of announcements and messages pertaining to community religious events. Information is supplied by the Tulsa Media Ministry. Religious programs produced by various denominations are also presented daily.

Childrens' Channel—Programming from schools and universities; all productions are especially geared for childrens' viewing.

Community Affairs Channel—Available for residents who desire to "air" opinions on civic or social matters. This channel also provides a "bulletin board" (automated) display format for messages advising the community of civic events and public service type announcements.

City Government Channel—Agencies of the Tulsa City government are equipped with complete television production studios and provide program material related to local governmental matters. A microwave link between the city & county's studios and Tulsa Cable is used for live telecasts of public meetings. (See separate box)

Three News Channels (automated). Instantaneous news directly off the AP broadcast wire. Channel 3: News Headlines (24-hour service); Channel 15: News Details (24-hour service); Channel 27: Oklahoma News (24-hour service)

Three Sports Channels (automated). Channel 4: Sports Headlines (wire service sorted; 24-hour ser-

vice); Channel 16: Sports Details (stories taken from the AP wire; 24-hour service); Channel 28: Sports Scores (bulletin board type display containing national, regional and local sports scores; 24-hour service). Channel 28 also displays sports programming. Remotes are handled by the system's fully equipped mobile unit and are either taped for later display or shown live via microwave. All News and Sports channels, except for "Sports Scores" are automatically edited for respective topical information by the Programmatic 3000 computer.

Weather Channel (automated). Provides current time/calendar weather data, continuously up-dated automatically from TeleMation weather instruments atop the Tulsa Cable studios. Display also includes weather forecasts and reports off the national weather bureau wire service. (24-hour service).

Movie Channel (automated). 24 hours of continuous movie viewing, uninterrupted by commercials. Tulsa offers subscribers a choice of fourteen different movies per week, rotated so that a viewer could conceivably watch a "new" movie, at the same specific time, every night of the year. All movies are displayed on videocassette from Tulsa Cable's T-MATIC™ Automated Videocassette Programming system. Transfers

from 16mm to cassette are made in-house. Movies are vintage 1968 or earlier but that hasn't affected the popularity of the channel.

Two Business News Channels (automated). Business stories and financial reports from the AP wire; and NYSE/AMEX stock quotations.

TV Program Guide Channel (automated). A four-hour "Look Ahead," presenting the schedule for all programs on the cable, continuously up-dated by the computer so that program information is current at any given time for the up-coming four-hour period. (24-hour service).

That's 24 channels on the cable now, with one additional planned—a convention/tourist channel offering viewers information on recreational activities, chamber-of-commerce supplied data, and tourist guide type displays. A channel has been set aside for public access but so far there is no demand.

Keeping 24 channels on the system is no easy task. It requires careful planning, sophisticated equipment, and creative personnel. To Production Manager, Hurst Swiggers, "It's a challenge that really keeps up moving."

Tulsa Cable's staff is responsible for providing about 25 hours of local origination programming a



Leon Rollerson gets ready for a taping session. Tulsa Cable uses IVC color cameras and 1 in. VTRs.



Don Jones operates TeleMation production switcher during one of the system's regular programs.



24-hour continuous movie displays and other videocassette programs can be handled automatically. Each player can be automatically started and stopped from the computer.

Anne Higginbotham, Tulsa U "intern-operator" enters daily TV Program Guide up-dates into computer memory. Using a tele-typewriter, she will have a "hard copy" reference of the entries.

week with some regular programs live or taped from their fully-equipped color studios or mobile unit. Close to 50% of these productions involve sports—Tulsa Cable has produced over fifty sports remotes since January.

One-half of the multi-channel operation is generated by a TeleMation Programatic 3000 computer controlled automatic origination package. According to Swiggert the system is extremely easy to operate. Employing four full-time "operators," most of whom are "interns" from Tulsa University's educational media center, Swiggert claims new recruits can learn to operate the computerized system within a one-week training period. A typical operator's day may be split up among various duties, including data entry for those automated channels requiring daily up-dates such as the TV Program Guide, Sports Scores, or special announcements for any of the system's "bulletin board" type channels. The operator is also responsible for checking audio levels on all channels carrying background music; making sure videocassette programs are on-line as scheduled; regularly spot-checking all channels for performance status; and helping as needed in studio production.

Why did Tulsa Cable choose the computerized au-

tomatic channel approach to offer their subscribers the widest variety of programming available on cable anywhere in the country? Management says it's an excellent solution to multiple channel local origination—at a reasonable cost.

United Cable Television is currently beginning construction on two new systems which will be formatted similarly to the Tulsa operation. Their Albuquerque (New Mexico) and Hartford area (Connecticut) systems will both include TeleMation Programatic 3000 multi-channel computer packages and will offer subscribers the same kind of individualized, viewer-interest automatic services, along with regular programming.

"We feel our automated channels are certainly an important part of the overall cable service package," says Greg Liptak, UCT's Vice President in charge of Marketing, "but aggressive, well-planned marketing and operations expertise are as important as the services you have to offer."

Marketing before and after

Subscriber handling from point of initial contact through installation is a well planned, smoothly-executed on page 60



President Bill Swanson feels CATV systems need finely integrated packages of program and marketing services.

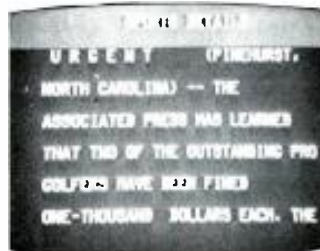


Production Manager, Hurst Swiggert, says movies, weather and sports scores are the most "popular" of the automated services.



Tulsa Cable's all-Jerrold headend distributes the system's 24 channels to over 21,000 cable subscribers.

Typical automated displays generated by the character generator and controlled by mini-computer.



cutted professional marketing process. As cable construction reaches a new district, all potential subscribers (previously identified and classified by the Marketing Department) are personally contacted. If a sale is made, no later than 20 days after installation, a Tulsa Cable PR girl—attractive, uniformed and specially trained, calls upon the subscriber to see “how things are going.” She checks the service, can make minor converter and/or color set adjustments, and notes feedback from the customer regarding his satisfaction (or dis-satisfaction) with the cable service. If she finds problems on the cable, they are corrected within 24 hours (a service offered seven days a week, at no charge to the customer). If all aspects of the ser-

vice are satisfactory, she reports this condition too. “A lot of trouble is taken to insure the subscriber’s complete satisfaction with the cable,” says Swanson. “For instance, if problems are encountered with a subscriber’s color TV set, we don’t just tell him that it’s his set and not the cable—we show him. And we encourage all of our subscribers to report problems promptly; then we make every effort to remedy the trouble that same day. We feel that good customer service and PR really pay off and are important to the system’s overall success.”

Jerrod set-top converters are used to pull in the 24 channels. All signals are processed through Jerrod headend equipment. BM/E

31—The City Government Channel

Tulsa is one of the few communities that has devoted real resources—equipment and people—to the operation of a government channel. In Tulsa this means both the city and the county. A complete production studio is located on the premises of the Tulsa City-County library. Cost of the studio at the library and equipment came to over \$110,000. Staff consists of two full-time persons and two part-time persons. Annual operating budget this first year was \$56,880 not counting some services supplied at no charge by the library. Director of the program is Tom Ledbetter.

What happens on a city-government channel? First major agency to use cable TV was the Health Department, which prepares one program a week. Thrust of this programming is primarily educational. Shortly after the cable system commenced operation, Channel 31 began covering meetings of the City Commissioners which are held twice a week. This is a major activity since the average meeting runs about two hours. Occasionally a meeting lasts five hours. The longest ran 5½ hours when a battle over a zoning matter came up. These programs are produced live but also taped for repeat two or three times a week. There is no editing performed. Live feed goes from city hall to the headend via a microwave channel. Tapes for later play are delivered by hand to the headend.

Another extensive user of the city channel is the Parks and Recreation Department. The Zoo is a popular shooting location, followed by flower gardens. Some of the Parks and Recreation programs deal with, and promote, arts and crafts.

There are about 50 agencies that could be the source of programming. Ledbetter reports that about half of this number have been contacted so far.

After nearly a year of such programming, what is the outlook? Ledbetter remains optimistic and he is pleased with the support he is getting from the city fathers. It’s a time consuming job to explain the potential of cable TV programming to agencies who have traditionally not been media oriented, but the staff has run into no major roadblocks.

More equipment and staff would be a help. Trouble with equipment is the biggest frustration. When CM/E called, one camera was down and this curbed operations. A time base corrector is a must. Right now channel 31 plays some tapes in the early morning when a TBC can be borrowed from Tulsa Cable. A more sensitive camera would be good for cable-casting the city council meetings since the commissioners do not want lights facing them. Ledbetter may switch to black and white coverage so that a



View of studio at the library.

sharper picture can be transmitted. Extra equipment to leave at City Hall would be desirable because of the wear and tear in moving everything in and out twice a week.

Right now Channel 31 programming is on the cable about 12 hours a day—from noon to 5 p.m. and then again the next morning from 3 a.m. to 9 a.m. No, Tulsa does not have a large graveyard shift population—it’s just that those wee morning hours are attractive because of the availability of a TBC. When the channel gets its own TBC it will do some programming during prime time evening hours.

Another major piece of equipment will be used early this spring that will increase programming hours. The library is getting a Systs-Matic “electronic juke box” which will play video cassettes automatically. Hopefully this unit will operate unattended on week-ends. The same system can scan a series of card visuals and Ledbetter hopes to put employment openings on the channel when the cable would otherwise be dark. Channel 31 also has on order one of Eastman Kodak’s Supermatic film video players.

For next year, Ledbetter will try to increase his staff by one more full-time person. He needs a full-time technical engineer because keeping equipment running is a big job. This will free another person for more production.

Is anybody watching? No attempt has been made to measure or gauge viewership. The city council likes the idea of its sessions being televised. If the microwave is out, people do call in complaining. There’s evidence that at least a few people are watching and that’s sufficient for the moment. Ledbetter would like to see an evaluation made but since the cost for that would be a major budget item such research will have to wait.