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Tuning in TV to the new future

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Abstract:

WHAM (Channel 13) is multicasting, expanding its morning newscast on a Rochester station it recently acquired and offering new services such as news alerts and video displayed on cell phones. Channel 10 created Weather Plus, a 24-hour channel broadcast on digital cable channel 110 and channel 10.2 for viewers with digital television sets, complementing its own station on channel 10.1.

Full text:

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Staff writer

In the not too distant future, WHAM-TV vice president and general manager Chuck Samuels wants to reach his audience via three screens: the television, the computer and the telephone.

"The customer is no longer just glued to the television," Samuels said. "They want to use our product in many ways."

Welcome to the new age of media, in which companies vying for a share of an increasingly fragmented market are sprucing up their offerings.

WHAM (Channel 13) is multicasting, expanding its morning newscast on a Rochester station it recently acquired and offering new services such as news alerts and video displayed on cell phones.

WROC-TV (Channel 8) is updating its Web site to create viewer interactivity, and WHEC-TV (Channel 10) is seeking to satisfy the need for continual weather reports.

"We're looking at ourselves not as a TV station but as a provider of information," said Arnold Klinsky, vice president and general manager of WHEC, the local NBC affiliate.

A veteran of the industry who has been at WHEC for 23 years and in television for more than 40 years, Klinsky, 63, recalls when selling advertising was easier because there were generally three network-affiliated stations and a public TV station in each market.

"You had a scarcity of where to advertise," Klinsky said.

Times have changed and so have consumer habits. Klinsky and all media managers are devising ways to evolve.

Channel 10 created Weather Plus, a 24-hour channel broadcast on digital cable channel 110 and channel 10.2 for viewers with digital television sets, complementing its own station on channel 10.1. WHEC broadcasts in analog and on cable on Channel 10.

The station added a meteorologist for the extra weather programming, which airs 24 hours a day, seven days a week. As TV broadcasting shifts to digital, such multicasting becomes a critical part of the business plan, Klinsky said, adding that "everyone is looking at uses for multicasting."

At WHAM, Rochester's ABC affiliate, the station last month hired seven new staffers to expand its morning newscast by two hours, testing the multicasting waters.

As analog is expected to sign off in 2009, digital television allows broadcasters to split into multiple streams.

When its morning show wraps up at 7 a.m. on Channel 13 and digital channel 13.1, the expanded broadcast is shown on the CW Network, cable channel 16, and on channel 13.2 for people with digital sets.

WHAM acquired the local CW station three months ago.

"It is more cost efficient to run two TV stations under one roof," Samuels said.

Last week, WHAM brought back popular morning personality Stan Munro, who now lives in Syracuse, for one week to help inaugurate the expanded newscast.

The station is innovating in ways beyond television, updating its Web site more often and offering news alerts to cell phones.

"The business has been fragmenting for years," Samuels said. "We all have to scrape a little harder for that piece of the pie."

WHAM will get a new owner sometime this year as its parent, Clear Channel Communications, has put all its television stations and small-market radio stations up for sale. But that shouldn't affect the product in any way, Samuels said, noting it will be his fourth ownership change in 10 years at the station.

"We are a highly successful station," he said.

As media companies compete for consumer time and advertising dollars, branding and product offerings become crucial to their survival, said Tom Proietti, professor of communications at Monroe Community College.

"All media outlets have to get into product differentiation," Proietti said. "There's more competition for fewer ad dollars."

For example, all three network-affiliated stations in the market as well as Time Warner's R News are

highly visible in the community, creating their own brand identities, he said. Advertisers prefer to buy time on productions that are distinctive.

Marc Jaromin, general manager at WROC, the local CBS affiliate, believes interacting with viewers and making sound fiscal decisions are key to the station's growth.

In September 2005, the Nexstar Broadcasting-owned station entered into an agreement with Sinclair Broadcasting to operate WUHF-TV (Channel 31), the Rochester Fox affiliate, and produce a separate newscast from its studios on Humboldt Street. The Fox newscast is on at 10 p.m., while WROC's own late-night news show airs at 11.

The arrangement has worked for both companies, Jaromin said.

And WROC is in the process of updating its Web page to meet the need for on-demand information. The new site will have more content provided by viewers, he said.

"The consumer today is less in tune with sitting down and watching a newscast at 6 p.m.," Jaromin said. "They want information when they want it."

The Web site will be viewer-driven, he said.

"It's all about being local," Jaromin said. "It's all about how consumers are using media."

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