

Fox uses NFL to woo network affiliates

Network also gives back late night to affiliates

By Joe Flint

Looking to bolster its affiliate lineup before it starts carrying the NFL, Fox Broadcasting is going after rival network affiliates and hopes to meet with several group owners at the NATPE convention this month.

Separately, as expected, Fox is giving back the 11 p.m.-midnight time period to affiliates, effective Jan. 31. Fox is working on a late-night show, and affiliates will give back the time period when the show is ready to launch. Fox's late-night plans are still unclear. The network has had talks with radio personality Howard Stern, but those talks are said to have cooled.

While CBS affiliates may seem the most likely target of Fox's pitch since they no longer have football, Fox also has approached NBC and ABC affiliates about switching. Group owners contacted by Fox include Stauffer Communications, Brisette Broadcasting and Freedom Newspapers.

"We've had a conversation or two since they acquired the NFL," says Gerald Holley, vice president, TV, Stauffer Communications, who adds

that his group is not ready to change affiliation. "Sure it was a blow to lose football, but it's not the end of the world."

Paul Brisette, chairman of Brisette Broadcasting, says he will meet with Fox at NATPE to discuss affiliation switches, adding that he already met with Fox roughly six months ago.

Although Fox's first priority probably will be to sign affiliates in markets with no Fox affiliate, the company also wants to upgrade in markets where its affiliate has a weaker signal than that of the other networks' affiliates, according to broadcasters who have been approached.

Fox's desire to strengthen its lineup is not new. Broadcasters have been approached by Fox before. But having agreed to pay \$1.6 billion over four years for the NFL, Fox is more eager than ever to beef up its lineup.

Fox has roughly 141 broadcast affiliates—adding two just last week, in Chico and Eureka, Calif.—compared with more than 200 each for ABC, CBS and NBC. In terms of national reach the difference amounts to ap-

proximately 6%, but other network executives point out that not all Fox affiliates have the same signal strength of other network affiliates.

In markets where Fox does not have an affiliate, it distributes its signal via the local cable operator on its Fox Net service. Fox executives met last week to determine, among other things, how to tie in its cable coverage with its hopes of attracting new affiliates.

Executives at the other networks are aware of Fox's recent efforts but are not—as yet—concerned. "We don't sense any danger at this moment," an NBC executive says.

Fox has been approached by several small-market CBS affiliates interested in carrying the NFC games. Fox has told those affiliates that they can carry the games if they become full-fledged Fox affiliates. Whether Fox will change that offer to allow CBS affiliates to keep their current affiliation and still carry the games remains to be seen, but CBS affiliates head Tony Malara says the network would have a problem if its affiliates started making such deals. ■

First channel launched under cable law

It looks like a slow build for the nation's first retransmission-consent channel, The Pittsburgh Cable News Channel, which last week launched on roughly one-third of the market's cable systems with no advertising and all-repeat programming.

But it is still early, say channel partners WPXI(TV) and Tele-Communications Inc., the multiple system cable operator that serves approximately 44% of cable subscribers in the area. Advertisers will begin appearing on the channel this week, and carriage deals are in place that will boost distribution to most of the 850,000 area cable subscribers by the end of the year.

The channel's first original show, a 10 p.m. newscast featuring the WPXI news team, debuts today, Jan. 10. The channel eventually will add more original news, special event and talk show programming, says Mark Barash, programming director, WPXI. For now, the rest of the schedule features rebroadcasts of WPXI newscasts.

Barash expects the channel to be a good promotion-

al tool for the station's newscasts and a source of additional ad revenue. Depending on frequency, spots for charter advertisers range from \$10-\$20 on the low end and \$100-\$150 on the high end, according to market sources. Pricing is comparable to local ad inserts on CNN and Headline News, says Bob Bugle, general sales manager for the local office of Cable Ad Net, the TCI advertising sales division representing the new channel. Cable

systems carrying the channel receive two minutes of ad time per hour, and all other advertising revenue is split between WPXI and TCI.

The Pittsburgh Cable News Channel is the first of several cable channels that are expected to launch as a result of cable reregulation. Under the retransmission-consent provision of the 1992 law, local television stations can negotiate a fee or other compensation from a cable system operator in exchange for their broadcast signal. Tele-Communications Inc. has deals with at least 30 broadcasters to program second channels.

—RB

