

HED: TO HD OR NOT TO HD

Deck: Stations Consider Migrating to HD News on a Market by Market Basis

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American television stations are migrating to HD local news, but not as quickly as you might imagine. While many of the news leaders in the top markets have transitioned to HD local news, most small to mid-market stations have not. And most of the action is confined to HD studio production since HD microwave and HD field editing are a technical challenge.

MUM'S THE WORD

To get a sense of where the industry is, we called station groups and found that many would not reveal their plans for converting their stations to HD News for competitive reasons.

Also, while we thought that HD news conversion was being managed as a group-wide effort, this was not the case. Station groups that did talk said that HD news was only being done in a few of their markets, and in many cases it was petitioned for by local station management, or put on the front burner because a station's facility needed renovations and it just made sense to go HD.

"The fact that you found no pattern is a good statement of where the market is," said Bruce Leichtman, president and principal analyst for Leichtman Research Group, Inc., a research analyst firm in the media, entertainment, and broadband industries, based in Durham, N.H.

"Every station has to look at this as a cost-benefit proposition. They need to consider where the market is. They know that only one-third of their market has HDTV sets, and only slightly more than half of those are actually watching hi-def channels. So, while that one-sixth of viewers is economically the highest end of the market, it's still a tough decision."

PEER PRESSURE

While being the first in a market to offer HD local news helps attract a HD audience, Leichtman said that perhaps the biggest factor of all is peer pressure. "Broadcasters make the cost-benefit analysis that it's not necessarily worth the cost. But then others leap into the pool, and that changes the dynamics because if you're not doing HD when others are, you might be in a bad position. HD is more of a defense than an offense right now."

The reasons behind a station's move to HD news—or decision to wait—can be very complex. Ardell Hill, senior vice president of operations for the broadcast division of Media General, in Richmond, Va., said it's a mix of technical and marketing issues.

“There are many things out there that drive the success of an on-air news product that are probably not that heavily tied to technology,” Hill said. “It's how the market identifies with the folks we have on the air, the stories we cover, and how well we're doing the job.”

“It's unlikely that you'll grow your ratings because you changed technology. Your ratings are built on the quality of the product and your ability to do a good job serving the community, and giving viewers the news they want,” said Hill. “Now, that being said, if your product is technically inferior to your competition's, that's going to hurt you, and if it's technically superior, that's going to help you. At the end of the day, I think you'll find that it's very hard to distinguish really significant technical differences between one station and another in the market.”

HD FIELD LAGS BEHIND

Media General already has five stations of its 18 stations offering HD local news: WFLA, in Tampa, Fla. (NBC); WSLS in Roanoke, Va. (NBC), WSPA, in Spartanburg/Greenville, S.C. (CBS); WCMH, in Columbus, Ohio (NBC) and WVTM, in Birmingham, Ala. (NBC).

WFLA is Media General's largest TV station and Tampa is the 13th largest market in the U.S. Media General is selling five of its smaller market stations. It has agreements to sell two stations to Hoak Media Corporation, and one station to Morris Network with negotiations on-going for the other two.

According to Hill, the five stations' HD local news is “studio only,” and none of the stations are producing hi-def news in the field. “All of the infrastructure pieces—the microwave path, microwave trucks, satellite trucks, editing platforms, and play-to-air servers—all have to be addressed as you make the transition to doing HD in the field and that tends to make the pieces of the puzzle more complex and take a little bit longer,” Hill said.

Currently, all five of its HD news stations have standardized on the Panasonic P2 workflow, shooting 16:9 SD in the field. Within the newsrooms, they use Thomson Grass Valley Ignite integrated production systems.

“Given that the Panasonic P2 cameras make such superb pictures, and they're relatively new SD digital cameras, it's likely to be two or three years before we start the migration to shooting HD news in the field,” Hill added.

2 GHz TRANSITION A FACTOR

At the Fox owned-and-operated stations, two stations have converted their local newscasts to hi-def—WTFX in Philadelphia and WJW in Cleveland, Ohio—but only for

studio production. According to Earl Arbuckle, vice president of engineering for the group, no Fox station has yet converted its ENG field operations to hi-def.

“For the foreseeable future, we expect to continue to shoot in SD in the field, albeit in 16:9 aspect ratio,” said Arbuckle. “The reason is there’s a challenge in getting full HD video back to the station over older microwave links. In fact, it’s pretty hard to do.”

“We’re in the midst of the 2 GHz band realignment, or band restacking, and until all of our older analog microwave gear is replaced with digital equipment, the infrastructure is not really there to bring hi-def live shots back to the studio via microwave,” Arbuckle added.

Like all broadcasters across the nation, all of the 2 GHz microwave gear at Fox stations is being replaced by Sprint (Nextel) to pave the way for Sprint to begin using some of the 2 GHz bandwidth broadcasters currently use for live news shots. Arbuckle said that once the digital microwave gear is in place [and eventually upgraded to HD], they can begin to put HD encoders on the trucks and begin microwaving HD live shots back to the studios from their Panasonic P2 HD/SD switchable cameras.

“But there are other considerations besides the microwave and transmission paths. There’s also the matter of the editing systems. We don’t have HD editing systems at this time and ...we need to upgrade the LAN infrastructures of our facilities to support this,” Arbuckle said. “We will do this in the future, but it’s still several years out.”

With respect to why WTXF and WJW were the first to convert news to HD, Arbuckle said that WTXF was expanding its facility from two floors of a building [in Philadelphia’s Old City neighborhood] to encompass the entire building. And this presented an opportunity to upgrade to HD studio control rooms, studios, and master control rooms.

WJW also had renovations that needed to be done to their facility in Cleveland. Arbuckle said, “The engineering team at the station lobbied station group management hard to be the first station in the group to offer HD local news. While there was a 15-percent premium on capital costs at that time, we thought the move made sense, and they went ahead and now transmit a HD signal out of their studio.”

Arbuckle said that a third Fox station is about to debut HD local news but the station’s identity could not be disclosed at press time.

MARKET CONSIDERATIONS

While none of the Meredith Broadcasting stations have yet gone HD for local news, the station group is exploring the possibility of converting some of its top market stations within the next year. Among the stations likely to be considered are: WGCL-TV, Atlanta, Ga. (CBS); KPHO-TV, Phoenix, Az. (CBS); KCTV, Kansas City, MO (CBS); and WFSB-TV, Hartford-New Haven, Conn. (CBS).

“The technical infrastructure at all of our stations are already HD-ready, so the first step would be to build out the HD studio infrastructures, including switching, playout, and weather graphics equipment, which we could do relatively quickly,” said Joe Snelson, vice president and director of engineering for Meredith Broadcasting Group, in Henderson, Nev.

“The second step would be adding HD field acquisition and bringing those stories back and editing them. And the third step would be doing live shots, live satellite feeds, and other live HD shots,” added Snelson. “However, the biggest technical challenge would be going from 4:3 to the 16:9 aspect ratio, while protecting for 4:3. Since KPTV-DT [Fox], our station in Portland, OR, is the only Meredith station currently shooting and broadcasting in 16:9 SDTV, their learning curve won’t be as steep when they convert to HD than our other stations that are 4:3.”

Snelson said that converting stations to HD news is not being done on a group basis but rather on the basis of individual stations and markets. Among the considerations will be whether competing stations in the markets have already gone hi-def for news; how going to HD news would impact Meredith stations’ standings in the market; and the financial ramifications.

“Perhaps the move to HD would entice viewers to sample our station’s newscast, and maybe we can expand the audience in that market,” said Snelson. “It’s still undetermined whether migrating to HD News has a solid link to ratings increases. These are all very difficult, market-driven questions.”

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