



Niche Channels – The new business opportunity

If you could buy a TV guide for the whole of Europe I suspect that you would need an unfeasibly large wheelbarrow to carry it in, a team of lackeys to turn the pages and a small paper mill to produce it. Niche channels in all their glory have arrived. And they are glorious. What was once the domain of the direct mail shot and the enthusiast's magazine can now arrive in your home via cable or satellite: country music, rock music, folk music, holidays, travel, history, food, drink, sex, gaming, extreme sports – a seemingly endless choice.

Just as radio went through an explosion of choice twenty years ago, TV is, as ever, following the lead of its more innovative cousin. Radio engineers have never been afraid of pushing the boundaries to make it happen....

Look at BFBS radio – making it happen around the world for over 60 years from Aden to Singapore to The Falklands. Lately in the Balkans and the Gulf the business of getting down to producing high quality programmes in glowing stereo on the ground for the benefit of a niche audience – our troops at the front line – continues. Making technology work for programmers has always been key to the operating philosophy of BFBS and their like around the world. And in a way this trail-blazing 'can do' attitude has found it's way in to the world of niche TV.

IBIS systems are currently installed at a number of interesting TV operations around the world – and what's key to these stations is their willingness to embrace the concept of getting on air with a high quality product, with minimum outlay and using technology to make it work.

Take M1 in Kiev – on the face of it not a ground breaking idea: a Music video channel which reflects the national, and to a lesser extent the international, scene for the Ukraine. Music channels abound but the difference here is the approach taken by the SI and project sponsor. The question they asked was how to make this channel look good, sound good, and yet appear very different from anything else on air in the region without spending a fortune or tying the staff up in operational knots.

Just as in the BFBS case, the key to making the station work is to give the staff a framework in which to do what they do best- make programmes without letting the technology get in the way. Too often we see stations hampered by hugely impressive, unfeasibly expensive technology which, in the end, adds nothing to the mix. It can be too easy to be won over by what is perceived to be an elegant



technological solution presented by that lovely salesman, when often the people buying the solution are not the ones who are going to have to work with it.

The refreshing thing about working in the niche channel area, where a large number of the participants are new to broadcasting, is that those preconceptions of wide monitor stacks, large mixers, router world and 24/7 shifts are absent.

M1 operates with a skeleton staff. Planning, scheduling, media management and playout all dovetail neatly in a compact office layout. Transmission is a neat gallery measuring only three metres by two. There is no requirement for a staffed gallery as the integration of scheduling, media management and playout is so close that all graphics are produced live to air – embossing the channel with a branding and style of operation which is readily identifiable as M1.

Managing the metadata is key here. The IBIS scheduling system captures the title, artist, year of release, highest position in the chart, favourite ice cream - whatever - associated with the music video and this data is then used by the IBIS playout controller to produce live graphics over the playout of the video :coming next straps, preview video in-a-window and menus are all produced live with no human intervention. And hey presto a niche channel is born. Without complex training courses or heavyweight, expensive, software. There is no need for it.

And isn't that the key to the business side of it all? Get the structure right; don't blow all the cash on the physical kit; leave a lot in the pot for programming and you stand a better chance of surviving the niche channel battle. Content is king. Without the stuff to show on your channel you might as well give up. You can have the most elegant technical solution, the longest racking in Europe, the most efficient A/C plant outside the tropics and the strongest editorial team on the planet but without the right content you may as well burn a stack of 100 Euro notes.

By offering a straightforward and integrated business-oriented package to broadcasters, they can get on with the job of making or sourcing the content to make them stand out from the crowd.

So where is this marriage of 'make it happen' attitude and integrated television systems taking us? Towards an explosion of opportunity for both fledgling broadcast operations with modest ambition and a plan for the future – and for providers of integrated process management systems such as IBIS.

Looking towards the growth of channels in the USA, I can see the rich tradition of local and regional broadcasting leading to a proliferation of new digital channels, just



as we've seen across Europe. Transponder time is now so plentiful and costs have reduced far enough to make the business case for 'giving it a go' a realistic option.

In the USA, I can see the fabulous tradition of the downtown Philadelphia Lexus dealer, with his own in-house-presented TV commercial stepping up a gear to a niche channel with, perhaps, state-wide Lexus dealers offering their own contributions. A channel filled with local offers, open day events, rallying, races, local charity events. This may not be the sort of channel to grab you all day long – the West Wing will still pull in the viewers – but if you're thinking about a new 4 x 4, and there's the Pennsylvania Lexus channel offering an open day in Ambler, then who knows what the audience potential may be.

It's a fabulous prospect for local community groups, college alumni, coast-to-coast business. Take that infomercial concept and let it fly.....

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About IBIS

IBIS produces a range of applications and products to enable the broadcaster to create an open and scalable transmission solution. IBIS' distinctive and user-friendly interfaces minimise training time and their adaptable approach gives broadcasters the flexibility required in either a modular or customised system.

Further product and press information and images can be obtained from the IBIS website: www.ibis.tv