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Time Warner's Channel 25 snub remains a mystery



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Join the club, Adam Ware. UPN's chief executive officer is as confused as any Tristate *Buffy*, *Star Trek* or *WWF* fan. He doesn't understand why Time Warner Cable won't carry WBQC-TV (Channel 25), UPN's low-power affiliate here.

"It's just a perplexing, bewildering situation," Mr. Ware said in a telephone interview.

He called after reading *Enquirer* stories about Time Warner's refusal to carry Channel 25, because federal regulations do not require cable systems to carry low-power stations. He was particularly interested Time Warner officials' statements about negotiating with UPN corporate executives on trying to pick up UPN programs — without carrying Channel 25.

Such negotiations were news to him.

"I'm not quite sure what they're talking about. I think I'd know (about such talks)," he said.

So he has decided to do his negotiating through the newspaper. Mr. Ware said that UPN headquarters in Los Angeles has received letters and calls from Cincinnati viewers worried that they won't see some of their favorite shows this fall. A new *Star Trek* series, called *Enterprise*, debuts on UPN, while *Buffy*, *the Vampire Slayer* and *Roswell* jump from WB to UPN.

"We want to fulfill their desires. We keep telling them: 'We have a station in Cincinnati!' Why won't Time Warner carry it? It's perplexing to me," Mr. Ware said.

Having a low-power affiliate in Cincinnati is not unique. UPN has 37 low-power stations — and 26 of them are carried on local cable systems.

"There are plenty of examples where many other types of (cable) operators have not had issues with low-power stations, as long as their signal is of air quality and the programming is something people want," said Mr. Ware, who supervised distribution of Fox network, childrens and sports programming from 1994 to 1996.

In fact, years ago three Greater Cincinnati cable operators picked up low-power Channel 25, which has an over-the-air signal not quite covering the I-275 loop. Channel 25 can be found on Adelphia Cable in Delhi Township and western Hamilton County; Insight Cable in Northern Kentucky; and the Lebanon municipal system.

But not Time Warner.

Virgil Reed, Cincinnati Time Warner Cable president and general manager, has said he only wants UPN programming. He has no interest in the rest of Channel 25's schedule, which includes Ohio State University and Big 10 basketball; the popular syndicated *Blind Date* show; and reruns of *Touched by an Angel*, *7th Heaven*, *Star Trek: The Next Generation*; *Diagnosis Murder*; *Bewitched*; and *New York Undercover*.

In Mr. Reed's words: "They don't have programming on a 24-hour basis to justify me kicking something off (basic or standard service tiers). That's not in my customers' best interest."

Mr. Ware said he supported Channel 25 owner Elliott Block, who wants his entire schedule added to Time Warner's lineup.

"He's got a lot of sports. There's a tremendous amount of programming that the local affiliate carries, and I'm sure many viewers would find it a great value (on cable)," he said.

Mr. Reed has offered to lease basic cable channel space to Channel 25 for a figure somewhere between \$840,000 and \$1.36 million. (Full-power Channels 5, 9, 12, 19, 14, 16, 48 and 54 are carried by Time Warner by law at no charge to the stations.) That price is way out of Mr. Block's range.

"Time Warner isn't doing anything illegal. They're not doing anything wrong," Mr. Block told *The Enquirer* last year. "It's more the case of them not doing something right. We're not 'must carry.' We're 'should carry.'"

Perhaps it was a tactical error by Mr. Block to demand that Channel 25 be a basic cable channel. (Why not settle for the growing digital tier?). Or to declare "war" on Time Warner on the station's Web site (www.wbqc.com). Mr. Ware wondered whether Time Warner has ignored Channel 25 for 10 years because somebody doesn't like Mr. Block's aggressive style.

"I don't think you have to like the guy to put programming on," Mr. Ware said.

Since money has been an issue in Time Warner carriage, Mr. Ware flashed some cash during our conversation. He said UPN plans to spend lots of money in Cincinnati this fall to promote *Buffy*, *Enterprise* and other shows. Part of that promotion, he says, could be spent promoting Time Warner Cable — if the system added Channel 25.

Mr. Ware also was aware of the April riots here and cited another reason for cable companies to add UPN:

"Given the serious diversity issue in Cincinnati, one would think Time Warner would want to carry the UPN Monday programs as well," he said. UPN's Monday African-American comedies include *Girlfriends* (produced by Tristate natives Mark Alton Brown and Dee LaDuke), *The Parkers*, *The Hughleys* and *Moesha*.

Channel 25 also has received copies of e-mails from Time Warner telling viewers that the cable system has explored bringing in UPN affiliate WSBK-TV from Boston.

"It's not entirely clear, by the way, that they could (legally) do that," Mr. Ware said.

"But why would they want to import a station from hundreds of miles away, when you have a perfectly good station already there with good programming and local sports?"

It always comes back to that question, doesn't it?

"I'm perplexed," he says again. "I don't understand."

Neither do we.