

Local Service Initiatives

Name of Initiative: ETV's South Carolina Channel

Station: South Carolina ETV

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Briefly describe the initiative and be as specific as you can be about the products or services that the initiative includes.

South Carolina ETV and public television stations nationally faced the siphoning off of traditional public television audiences to competitive cable networks; a slate of PBS programming that appealed predominantly to a narrow demographic; and the need to multicast in this new digital age. ETV reacted to this "perfect storm" convergence and opted to create a local solution with a new approach. ETV's South Carolina Channel is a digital broadcast service of South Carolina ETV. The service provides local programming for, by and about South Carolinians. Programming includes gavel-to-gavel coverage of the South Carolina General Assembly, classic ETV programs, arts series, and new original specials highlighting the state and its culture. The channel also covers educational initiatives and expanded, in-depth coverage of local events (including sports, business and government profiles, and independent documentaries).

How does this initiative fit into your "portfolio" of other Local Service Initiatives? Is it one of many initiatives and projects, or does it take the bulk of your "Local" resources?

South Carolina ETV transformed one of its four regional stations to support the channel. This strategic realignment allowed the Network's primary channel to retain its focus on education, the national program schedule, and expand its commitment to original local programming. The regional station's indigenous resources were converted to administrate, program and technically manage the channel. This change did not require increased staffing or additional budget monies during an inflexible and tight state budget year. Additionally, broader existing network assets were frequently tapped to create new local programming that aired exclusively on the digital sub-channel. The channel also boosted exposure for projects that were already "on the books" circumventing an older model of creating and airing programs one time then relegating them to the vault.

What station assets, competencies and/or relationships does the initiative build upon?

- Native turnkey operation in position (*core competencies and assets*)
- Content Acquisition available from robust existing local partnerships
- Optimizing physical resources and staffing
- Generating new partnership potentials with other state agencies, private organizations, and local governments
- Positioning South Carolina ETV as a significant partner in local community initiatives
- Reinforcing South Carolina ETV as a principal state agency and established community partner
- Carriage relations with cable and satellite providers

How would you describe the community benefit of this work? What needs are being addressed?

The South Carolina Channel came at an opportune time as ETV was looking at strategies to make all of its content into more than just television programs, and, therefore more valuable. And, essential to the success of the South Carolina Channel was developing new partnerships to work with us by either providing completed programming or partnering to create new content. Partnerships that were already underway for the South Carolina Channel included programming from Clemson University, the University of South Carolina College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, the South Carolina Department of Natural Resources, and the South Carolina Arts Commission (*...content or services that the station distributes or to which it adds value, but that is not primarily created at the station*). Most, if not all, of these partners view their relationship with ETV as reinforcement of their commitment to education, the community and state. Additionally, a partnership with ETV functions as a promotional tool to highlight institutional special initiatives and extend partners' brands.

The South Carolina Channel offers a broad variety of scheduling options for local original and existing programming. For instance, ETV may air a program about a national park on its traditional broadcast channel then offers a series of programs about South Carolina parks on the South Carolina Channel. Cross promotion references the Network programming and viewers are directed to learn more about parks of local interest on the digital sub-channel. There may also be an interactive web site with streaming video, detailed information and appropriate partner links. ETV's South Carolina Channel vastly increases the Network's programming flexibility and heightens awareness about the state, its political bodies, etc. This expanded broadcast "real estate" means ETV can air programs reflecting local interests and converge its media assets to meet the demanding challenges of a competitive, ever changing marketplace. It is the only broadcast outlet for the people in South Carolina to see and experience programming of length designed exclusively for them. (*...its broad approach to meeting the local needs of its surrounding community. For many stations, this strategy has become a portfolio of several local service initiatives.*)

Who is the “customer?”

The citizens and taxpayers of South Carolina and institutions, either public or private, invested in the history, culture, government, and lifestyle of the Southeast region and the state.

How do you know or measure if the customer’s needs are being met?

Customer Service, Programming, Pledge, and Master Control report positive and negative feedback from several sources: emails, phone calls, letters of support, and monetary pledge contributions. Ratings are not available today, but it is expected that in two-and a-half years these digital sub channels will be part of that process.

Who benefits from the initiative?

Digital broadcasting is all about leveraging assets and merging technologies to meet consumer/viewer expectations. South Carolina ETV can no longer afford the old model of producing a program, airing it once, then relegating it to the vault. Today everything we do has multiple uses that are adapted and repurposed for multiple audiences. Immediate beneficiaries are the citizens of the state and surrounding regional areas, K-12 schools, higher education, local legislators, local underwriters, and producers from state agencies, independent producers, colleges and universities, foundations, non-profits, etc. Most importantly, the Network transparently builds political and social capital with its constituencies. Further, the Network reinforces its role as a stakeholder in the advancement of life-long learning principles and education.

How do you measure the benefits?

ETV had an institutional sense of what South Carolina viewers wanted most from its statewide public broadcasting network--insightful and educational programming for and about our state--but, before making such a substantial investment, we wanted to be sure. The Network unveiled the South Carolina Channel in October 2003, after extensive research conducted by Market Search, a local firm, and with a new Network branding campaign in full swing. The channel is a 24/7 slate of programming specifically designed to appeal to South Carolinians who want, according to the research, programs reflecting their lives, their sports, their authors, and their environment. While intent upon staying true to its educational mission, ETV’s South Carolina Channel provides multi-dimensional, multi-faceted, multi-purpose programming with a distinct cultural voice. Initially, in Years One and Two, programming strategies centered on creating ‘punch-through’ original programming with the singular goal of engendering awareness of the channel on cable and satellite systems in South Carolina. So, original programs like statewide high school football and basketball championship games, live coverage of the South Carolina State Fair, Southern cooking, South Carolina gardening, and a bluegrass music series began airing as South Carolina Channel exclusives. Today thirty-seven institutions in South Carolina air their existing programming on the channel. That number continues to climb and has generated review guidelines before commitments can be made to air any externally produced submission. The channel is the only outlet for the people in South Carolina to see and watch programming designed exclusively with their interests in mind.

Describe the financial model for the initiative, being as specific as possible. How much does it cost? What are the sources and amount of revenue? How does it fit into your station’s overall economic model?

10 full-time employees dedicated to the channel; three part-time employees contribute add’l 45 hours per week; \$190,000 in start-up capital equipment costs.

25 hours of programming ingested per week; five hours per week promotional spots ingested per week; 60 hours per week dedicated to creating on-air promos.

Production of Exclusive Programming:
Revenue Generated:

Could other stations use this idea or model? Would it work for any size station or licensee type?

Yes, it can be used as a model, but careful evaluation and strategic planning should be done prior to any commitment. This effort required shifting new responsibilities to existing assets. Additionally, entire priorities, programs, initiatives might need to be realigned or scrapped to re-focus available resources. Branding, public relations, and public/private relationships with print and electronic media for promotion must be defined and a marketing plan should be developed. And, of course, mine internal technologies and initiatives to create cross promotional/alternative programming. Internal communication clarifying the expansion and how it affects operations and support services is essential. Talking points shared with staff detailing the advent of and strategic philosophy behind the new service keeps the message on target. It would be difficult for a single licensee to do this.

