

Lost in transition

We'll try hard not to surrender viewers to DTV confusion over the coming year. They'll love it if we help get them Ready for Digital. Frankly, they'll hold us responsible if we don't.

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This much we know—our viewers and members need help with the digital transition.

My wake-up call? It was an 87-year old, longtime member of OPB who said, “Thanks for calling, dear, but I really don’t need any more change in my life.” That was the day OPB staff members and volunteers kicked off our digital campaign by calling 2,000 senior members. We thanked them for their support and talked with them about the upcoming switch to digital broadcasting.

It became clear that many of our viewers are confused, uninformed and unsure about what to do. It seems that many of us in public broadcasting are also unsure about how best to proceed. When it’s our most loyal viewers — and most generous givers — who are likely to get lost in the transition, we must take action now.

We can’t afford to watch our reach, relevance and resources diminish. When we cross the finish line next year, it’s essential that every one of our viewers and members come across with us. But will they? In a recent study commissioned by the National Association of Broadcasters, more than 70 percent of respondents say they’ll either wait until 2009 to make the switch or they don’t know when they’ll make the switch.

No matter what your market size, you don’t have the resources or infrastructure to respond to an overwhelming flood of last-minute questions. It’s simply not possible. If most of our viewers wait until the last two months to make the switch, OPB alone could expect to field nearly 10,000 customer-service calls in the final weeks, which would quadruple our average call volume.

The only way we can succeed is by getting the majority of viewers to act now through an intensive campaign that runs across the entire year. We have an extraordinary opportunity right now to leverage expanded digital services, excellent customer service and trust into increased viewer and member loyalty. If we manage this well, we can strengthen our bonds with our most valued constituents.



“Your TV is changing,” says OPB producer Vince Patton in a spot aired on the network. “The simplest way to receive TV in your home after the digital switch in 2009 is to purchase a low-cost digital converter box.” He suggests that viewers apply now for the \$40 discount coupon, and he gives the contact info. “Free OPB TV will keep coming your way in the digital future.” (Screen grab: OPB.)

If we don't go all out to minimize DTV confusion, our viewers' and members' high expectations of us will suffer. Unfairly or not, some will blame us for the rocky transition.

Fortunately, we all have the skills for a project of this kind.

In public TV, we're experts at building successful campaigns. All year 'round, we encourage people to tune in and donate money. We know how to use television to communicate effectively and to integrate our messages on the air with those we deliver through direct mail, print promotion and e-mail. We know that simple, passionate, directive messages get the best results. And we know it takes frequent and numerous impressions for someone to hear a message and take action. These best practices can become the foundation of your digital-readiness campaign.

The campaign's key challenge will be to reach beyond marketing and promotion. It will hit us on the ground. For our audience, the switch to digital television involves equipment ... plugs ... wires ... remote controls ... antennas ... signals ... and change. This will cause confusion and questions. Since we own the "trusted source of information" brand, people will come to us first for answers. We must be prepared to help.

Whether your station will create its own local campaign, adopt a pre-built campaign or pick up elements from national campaigns, the first thing to do is assemble a team to manage your campaign. You need a leader to set the strategy, priorities and tone. You need a cheerleader to keep everyone excited and get everyone involved. And you need an implementer to make sure it all gets done.

You'll need skills from departments all over the station, including promotions, fundraising, communications, engineering, online and customer service. In fact, the results are so important that every staff member should have a role in the campaign. Even those who simply serve as station ambassadors to their friends and neighbors have to know the answers to basic DTV questions.

Our campaign at OPB has three elements: communication, service and partnerships.

Communication

We use every available opportunity to deliver key messages, on-air spots, membership drives, acknowledgements, direct-mail packages, station publications, e-communications and even signs in our lobby. Throughout the year, we'll send special e-blasts to our e-mail list, plus a special set of direct-mail pieces to the folks signed up for our Digital Help List. We're hosting events at the station to give donors and audience members the chance to see firsthand how to make the switch.

At our first event, Feb. 24, major donors and legacy donors will see a demonstration on the difference between analog TV, digital TV and HDTV. We'll show them how to connect a converter box to their TV sets, and we'll answer questions. We'll offer access to computers so donors without easy access to the Internet can apply for their converter-box coupons right away.

Since OPB launched its readiness campaign in early December, locally produced digital spots have aired more than 500 times. We've created information sheets and featured the issue in the OPB Member Guide and weekly e-newsletter. Ten thousand people are already signed up for our Digital Help List to receive

important information throughout the year. We've reached out to community organizations to encourage them to help spread the word. And our Member Center staff has personally helped nearly 3,000 people on the phone and through e-mail. We get a DTV call every 10 minutes or so all week long.

Oregonians' response may indicate OPB is helping to get the word out. Per capita, Oregon's rate of converter-box coupon applications is more than double the national average. The message is being heard. Our audience is taking action.

Because we believe the most challenging times lie ahead, when people start purchasing and hooking up their converter boxes, we're committed to a year of vital, relentless messaging and service at OPB. Our basic strategy is to provide clear, informative and directive messages that will reach our audience with consistency and impact.

The messages always mention the benefits of digital television: "It's easy. . . . It's inexpensive. . . . You'll love digital OPB," we say.

"You don't need to buy a new TV. . . . You don't need an HD TV. . . . You don't need cable or satellite service. . . . You don't need an expensive antenna. . . . All you need is a simple digital converter box. . . . But you do need to act now! Here's what to do. . . ."

But no on-air message, no matter how carefully crafted, can carry all the weight of informing and helping our audience.

Service

The sheer volume of technical information and "it depends" scenarios can be overwhelming. This is where excellent service comes in. That's why every message we create encourages people to come directly to us for help.

To provide the level of service required by the circumstances, it's essential for stations to begin the education within their own walls.

Instead of overloading the front-line staff with endless details about the DTV conversion, we brief them in phases—focusing now on the converter-box discount applications, for example.

Some will need extra help making the switch, so we will try to have a bank of converter boxes purchased by staff members and friends who don't need them to hand out as needed.

But we'll also have to manage viewers' high expectations. OPB invested weeks of work to develop training, how-to resources and an internal communications plan. Our engineers are drawing up a troubleshooting guide for the customer-service staff. If we can't easily resolve questions on the phone or through e-mail, we'll need to refer callers to other resources, including a list of TV technicians they can call.

To keep us working in lock step, we've expanded the role of one membership staff member to be the bridge between the campaign leadership, engineering and customer-service teams. We keep track of

what's confusing our viewers and members so we can react appropriately in our communications. And we translate the complexity into plain, simple language—for our customer-service team, for our entire staff, and ultimately, for our viewers and members.

Partnerships

But when it comes down to the coming crunch, four customer-service staff members plus 150 OPB employees spreading the news to their friends and neighbors will not guarantee success in Oregon. That's why partnerships are an important part of our equation.

We're expanding relationships with community organizations throughout the region, educating their leaders and communications professionals and encouraging them to reach out to the people they serve. We're focusing on organizations with constituents who are likely to be left behind in the transition so we can ensure that everyone in Oregon can still enjoy public broadcasting. And we're working with these organizations to deliver donated converter boxes received through our Friends & Family Converter Box Donation Program.

So go find your leader, your cheerleader and your implementer. Fire up your staff's enthusiasm and kick your readiness campaign into high gear today. The importance of addressing the transition now cannot be overstated. Over the next year, the needs of our viewers and members will far exceed anything we are prepared to deal with on a daily basis, unless we start now. Stay in touch with colleagues from other stations to keep your energy up and the ideas flowing. We can all cross the finish line together and assure that our viewers and members will be there with us, cheering about how great "digital" public broadcasting is.

Becky Chinn is the membership director at Oregon Public Broadcasting. She serves on the PBS Development Advisory Committee, teaches Membership Academy and Pledge Academy, and is a participant in the PBS Leadership Development Program. She applied for her converter-box coupon Jan. 1, though she hopes to splurge on an HDTV.

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