

This piece by Ann Arlen is an excellent, concise overview of the experience we've been having in New York City. As she indicates, guaranteed access is just the first step. Once you've gotten your tapes on a cable system you've got to get viewers to change their habits and incorporate your input into their lives. Remember, the success of the commercial networks isn't that they provide programming every now and then, but that their very existence creates a habit pattern in the majority of peoples' lives.

By way of introduction, and to add some details to Ann's article (originally done for *Foundation News*), some of the frustrations we've encountered are:

1. Inadequate facilities: The Sterling-Manhattan system has only one half-inch playback deck (an AV5000) which is left on an old card table in the corner of the studio. Moreover, they have no switcher so that even if you bring up your own deck there's still an interval between tapes when the engineer patches from one to the other. And it's not uncommon for the engineer to miss the end of a tape because he's on his coffee break or chatting with someone in the other room. The result is intolerable dead time on the screen.

John Sanfratello of Sterling, who has emerged as a genuine hero through his ceaseless energy on behalf of Public Access, says he submitted a \$9,000 budget to his management for a half-inch studio to include Public Access editing and community Porta-Paks. But not until the fall, if then.

Finally, until just recently we were plagued with downright shitty transmission. Edited tapes wouldn't hold up and even second generation tapes wouldn't play right. This was due to the state-of-the-art of Sterling's equipment. If you are negotiating a franchise, make half-inch compatibility a prerequisite. Even with old equipment, it can be done, as Sterling demonstrated, by sheer persistence in trouble-shooting the problem. Sanfratello had to hassle with his own company's bureaucracy to get into the headend room to solve the problem (because that was the domain of another department).

But we still can't do live transmission which means there's no way to get real time feedback on what's being shown, or to make contact with the community.

The problem is, as stated elsewhere, that Public Access is a service that the cable station *has* to provide, not one they want to. Because they don't believe that it can enhance the financial position of the system, they are making the minimum commitment in time, money and imagination.

2. No money: Ultimately it is a rip-off for a profit-making business to get free products to sell. There must be money coming back from a cable station to Public Access programmers. Five percent of the system's revenues in New York already go back to the municipal government. Thus, the next step is to get the city government to turn around and distribute that revenue to producing groups. Or, cable systems should be required to directly underwrite community access programs. Better, however, to consider public access a selling point and incorporate it into the profit structure of CATV through subscriptions.

Publicity: Because the New York cable owners think of Public Access as a chore, they have no incentive to publicize it. But you can't establish a habit pattern without information about what's available. Thus, Public Access must require a publicity commitment on the part of the system owner in the form of a programming schedule sent to subscribers and listings in local newspapers.

(So far, the Sterling system has sent nothing to its subscribers publicizing Public Access, even though they mail their own hype at least once a month. A project to get them to subsidize and mail a brief brochure for Public Access has been met by continual requalifications. Management there apparently feels that Public Access is just another drain on a company that already is showing a loss, not that it is something people would want to pay to see. To their credit, they have begun an electronic listing of Public Access programming using a camera which scans typed descriptions of what's coming. They have also been frustrated by the unreliability of programming groups in getting tapes to the station on time.

Teleprompter, on the other hand, had printed and distributed tens of thousands of brochures promoting Public Access at their own expense. They have maintained much more suitable equipment for half-inch transmission. And they are now aggressively programming local news).

