



In the Spotlight

NYC-TV: Waking Up Government Programming
By Stephen Warley

I don't know about you, but when I think of government television programming, images of incredibly boring council meetings seem to come to mind. You know, stationary shots of a panel half asleep listening to some cantankerous citizen going on and on about some mundane detail of a topic you could care less about. Better yet, most of the time I don't even know what the meeting is about the first place. Click.

This past June the City of New York decided to shed that image with the relaunch of its flagship cable channel, NYC-TV. Not only has the quality of the programming improved, but it is also becoming a greenhouse for innovative television programming ideas and production techniques. TVSpy spoke with Arick Wierson, General Manager of NYC-TV.

TVSPY: Why did the City of New York decide to revamp its flagship cable channel?

WIERSON: When we came into office, we were looking around at the city's different assets, particularly its media assets, and we thought that this was something that was severely under serviced. By putting in a little bit of effort and not too much money, we believed we could really turn this around and make it an effective marketing tool for New Yorkers about New York. This was an opportunity to let them know about the services the city does provide, sort of filling a niche that isn't really being met by any other for-profit network because we don't have to have advertising. We can do some things that are a little bit out of the box, of course we are very interested in making sense economically, but we are not driven by a quarter by quarter bottom line like a typical private sector enterprise would be.

TVSPY: Usually when you think of government television programming, you think of a badly shot meeting or press conference. What are you doing to change that perception?

WIERSON: We still have a staple. We are actually mandated by the city charter to cover some city council meetings, some city planning commission things and we take the Mayor live. We still have that component.

Let me give you some historical perspective. When I came to Crosswalks, which is what the channel was known at that point, there was a hodgepodge of local C-SPAN-esque programming. There was no rhyme or reason. You couldn't even go to a Web site to find out what was playing when. Things aired at the most random times. One show might start at 8:37pm and the next show at 9:13pm. Even if you were watching it was sometimes difficult to discern what you were watching.

The launch of NYC-TV on June 24 was basically the end product of a full year reorganization in terms of operations and programming folks, etc. One of the things we realized is that we have a strong niche market and obviously a legal mandate we are fulfilling with government programming.

On the government side we were posed with the challenge of how to make it more exciting. One of the first things we did was to put it in time slots. E wanted to give people a predictable time to tune into the city council meeting. We created an appointment-based programming philosophy.

TVSPY: What type of programming do you have besides coverage of press conferences and meetings?

WIERSON: I think we first wanted to prove we could improve coverage of government programming. That's clearly an aspect of New York. New York is much more than government. Government action is much more than just press conferences. It's the municipal pool that is opening at the beginning of summer. It's all the other things the city does that people really don't recognize that the city is behind. Secondly, probably the most important thing, it's not about us, but rather us being able to tell the public that we have all these services to take advantage of.

We have a number of services we want to share with the public to make their life easier. 311 for example, is one of the Mayor's major initiatives. It's one phone number that you call, about any non-emergency services. NYC-TV is one of the channels that is able to communicate those types of services to the public in a format they are use to, which is watching television.

TVSPY: What type of non-governmental programming do you have?

WIERSON: I would divide up our programming into three basic types. Number one, government programming, which we have discussed, number two is utilitarian programming and three, original programming.

An example of utilitarian programming would be City Drive Live. I looked around to see some of the assets that the city already has that we can leverage and that we can turn into something useful. The Department of Transportation already had all of these traffic cams all across the city. You can go to their Web site and watch them in real time. We plugged into those cameras and feed it straight up to our master control creating a show called City Drive Live. We created certain routes that people frequently used and chose cameras along those routes. We made this program predictable, so every 5 minutes you would see a route that was of interest to you. We also coupled up that with traffic advisories and "buckle up" messages, but in a very hip, watchable format.

Even if I can get someone to watch just for 5 minutes to help them with their commute, I can also hit them with something else, like promoting an upcoming council meeting.

What programming ideas would you pitch to your local municipal channel? Share your thoughts in the Next Generation TV Watercooler

Our third area of programming is our original programming. We started a show before we started NYC-TV that has been a big hit called City Classics. Again, we don't have a huge budget, so we have to think innovatively. We talked to the Municipal Archives, which keeps track of everything, including photos, old video footage, etc. We took their old historical footage and we packaged it into this show called City Classics, which are classics moments in New York history.

Another show we launched is called \$9.99. It's a neighborhood show, our host is Julie Laipply, a former Miss Virginia. She takes the viewer around on a whirlwind tour of New York and she spends less than 10 bucks during the whole day. It's a half hour show. We have a map to show people how she gets around the city and have graphics to show how much money she spends as she goes.

TVSPY: Are you looking at other distribution channels?

WIERSON: We are creating original content, but we are one channel with a small "c", of distribution, but we are definitely looking at the distribution of all the other channels. For example, right now in New York, the Taxi and Limousine Commission has a pilot program for in-taxi videos (unfortunately the city just announced this week it is abandoning the program). They were very interested in this content because they wanted very New York type of content. Each \$9.99 show has about 8 segments that we cut up into various 90 second segments that we gave to the Taxi Commission. We are looking more and more to other channels of distribution of where we can get our message out.

TVSPY: Community generated media will slowly be gaining momentum with the rise of DV Cameras and laptop editing software. Do you see this as a source of programming?

WIERSON: You are absolutely right. The trend is more and more that anyone with a \$1000 camera and a laptop can create almost broadcast quality stuff. Internally that's where we are moving. We are getting out of this whole idea that you are limited by your traditional function in the production of television. Producers should be able to shoot, log, edit, to do just about everything.

We actually have an interesting partnership with Michael Rosenblum and Steve Spoonamore. We have a very strong agreement with DV Dojo. They are the biggest proponents of the democratization of film and television. Their students go out and shoot pieces for us. The only stipulation is that it has to be about New York. Internally I created an interstitial thing called On Location, so I have a standard open, a standard close, but they shoot and edit it. Then I vet it to make sure there is nothing inappropriate.

In addition to learning about shooting and editing, they understand that there is a strong possibility that their stuff will end up on television. I get these interesting snippets of New York life that's well presented. Not only am I getting great content, but I am also getting training for my own staff. They are getting trained in the one-man shop mentality of television.

TVSPY: Seems like you have a little more freedom to innovate than a for-profit network.

WIERSON: I have some built in freedom in the sense that I'm prevented from doing straight on advertising because I am a government channel. We do have some leeway in developing sponsorships along the lines of the PBS model. Clearly you will be seeing more and more things like this. For example, the On Location interstitial segment is branded as NYC-TV and the DV Dojo present On Location and at the end it has their logo.

I am able to offer up those types of things to organizations who want to partner with us. What they see in us is A, here is a really cool idea, B its very New York centric and I want to associate myself with New York, and C NYC-TV is a pipeline, it's in 1.8 million households in the city of New York, the media capital of the world and a lot of people put a high value on that. I think we are constantly looking for the out of the box deal because we don't have cash, so that is never really on the table. If that is all they are interested in then there really is no conversation. To be honest with you, most people want to associate themselves with the city of New York and they want to do what they can to help the city and they see this as an interesting outlet.