

Giving the Viewers a Go

It is surely only for the delivery of programming that pay TV exists. If it does not provide the programming that its customers want, it will fail.

This statement might sound like the most obvious truism, but as its author points out, '[t]he major element of pay TV which has received very little consideration is without doubt its most important - programming'.

The speaker was consultant and former Ministerial staffer (to Tony Staley) Dick Rowe, whose paper at the Technology Training Corporation (TTC) conference took a provocative look at the conventional wisdom about the kinds of programs that would 'work' on pay TV.

A research study in which Rowe was involved last year asked people what they wanted from a pay TV service. One overall requirement, he said, was consistently emphasised: what people expected from a television service they were paying for was a relatively high level of quality. When this response was explored further, the following conclusions emerged:

'Quality' programming will:

- be different to what is already available on television, and will therefore offer the subscriber a choice not available to non-subscribers;
- not suffer from the practice of counter programming (programming like against like) which is a major source of dissatisfaction with existing television, and will therefore offer diversity of choice rather than a choice of similar alternatives;
- meet subscribers' specific interests by providing programs which are of direct **relevance** to subscribers, rather than programs directed at the widest possible market.

Rowe believes that all three of these elements should be present in pay TV programming. In his experience, how-

ever, very few intending pay TV providers have any real grasp of what will meet any one of these requirements.

Radical Approach

The concept of 'theme channels' in the context of existing pay TV involves extracting from free-to-air television services the program categories which are of greatest audience appeal and producing them as complete channels on the pay TV system. The result is what Rowe calls 'vertical channels', comprising a complete day's programming within each subject area.

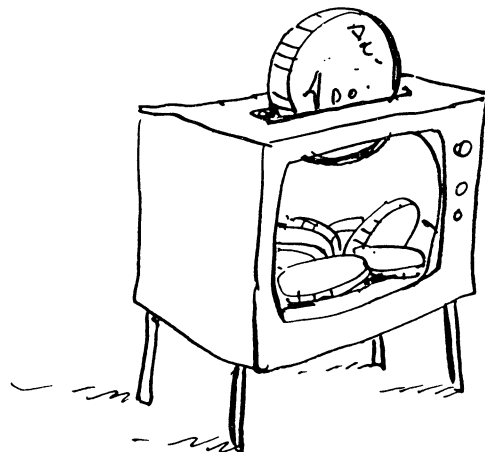
Rowe proposes an alternative programming approach which he believes would meet consumer requirements, an approach which is as much one of structure as of content. It presents material which 'goes beyond the limitations of what is expected of the television medium', and also does so in a way which is different from the standard pay TV format.

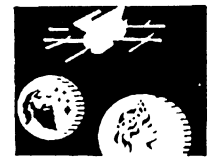
Essentially, it involves turning the 'vertical' channels through ninety degrees to create 'horizontal' channels, each composed of different program elements designed to appeal to particular groups of subscribers. A sample day's programming is shown in the schedule on p.11. Rowe emphasises

that this is a suggestion and not a paradigm, intended to exemplify the eclectic nature of TV programming and to meet the demonstrated audience desire for choice, diversity and relevance.

Rowe told *CU* that he had found little interest in this radical approach among aspiring operators, who seem content to assume that overseas experience will provide the basis for pay TV programming in Australia. This ignores, however, substantial differences in the Australian market such as the existence of a strong television system comprising diverse elements, and the exceptionally longstanding and widespread use of video hire as a form of pay TV in Australia.

After waiting so long for pay TV, Australia has the opportunity to do something different, Rowe believes. Because of the point at which we are entering the pay TV market, the area of pay-per-view is one which will play a much greater role in Australian pay TV than has been the case elsewhere, Rowe says. 'Rather than the standard pay-per-view fare of boxing championships, however, this form of pay TV in Australia will have the potential to bring home a broad range of entertainment and information'. Rowe considers it essential that all systems of pay TV in Australia should be planned so as to incorporate pay-per-view. □





How Pay TV Could Look

The following program schedule is an alternative approach to pay TV programming proposed by consultant Richard Rowe. It covers one day on a pay TV system with five channels, programmed to attract different target audiences at different times of the day.

Monday	1	2	3	4	5
09:00	Live coverage: final round of international golf	Prospects: What's on in politics, business arts, etc	Movie: <i>Storm Boy</i>	Australian segment of the Financial News Network	Age of Reason: the John Farnham concert
12:00	Interview: Peter Garrett on the environment	Movie: <i>Sweetie</i>	Nature Watch: Co-produced by NHK of Japan and TVOnt.	Jag vs Mercedes: a motoring or investment decision	Off Campus France in words and music
15:00	Movie: <i>Midnight Cowboy</i>	Distant Seats: <i>A Doll's House</i> from Belvoir Street Theatre (pay per view)	1989 World Surf Circuit	Oscar Petersen in Concert	The Art and Science of the Architect
18:00	Do It Yourself: How to program your PC	Coverage of the Contemporary Art Fair from the Royal Exhibition Bldg Melbourne	An Inside Look at Industry: the making of paper	The India of Salman Rushdie: from the Discovery Channel	Virginia Slims International Tennis

Big Holes Gaping in BS Act

The Federal Court recently rejected an application by the Communications Law Centre to take part in the proceedings brought by Steve Cosser against the decision by Minister for Communications Bob Collins to bar the use of MDS for pay TV. The court also ordered the Centre to pay Cosser's costs.

The CLC wanted to represent the interest of Australian TV viewers in the action. The Court found however that no matter how well intentioned and useful the Centre's role may be in presenting a broader perspective and a more neutral focus than the other parties, its participation was 'not necessary' to the determination of the issues before the court.

Acting Director of the CLC, Michelle McAuslan, said that the Court's decision marked a return to the bad old days of broadcasting regulation where interested persons or groups - other than station licensees - had little or no chance of being heard in the resolution of broadcasting disputes. 'The Centre is particularly concerned to ensure that the ABA carries out its functions independently of government interference and in the public interest', Ms McAuslan said.

Although the Centre is grateful that Steve Cosser has waived the payment of costs, the fundamental problem of

lack of public process in the Broadcasting Services Act remains, she said.

The Centre has now written to the Minister seeking amendment to the Act to make it adequately reflect the Government's stated commitment to take account of the public interest in broadcasting decisions.

In the same letter, the Centre drew the Minister's attention to the seven month period that has elapsed since it first sought information from the ABA on licensees' compliance with the advertising time standard, to assist the Centre in making submissions on the FACTS draft codes of practice.

During the drafting of the Act, DOTAC had told the Centre that such information could be obtained under Freedom of Information legislation. In practice, the Centre has found that the FOI Act is 'wholly unsatisfactory' as a means for the public to gain access to information.

The Centre called on the Government to implement regulations to:

- restore the previous ABT system of an open inquiry file;
- provide for all documents considered by the ABA to be publicly available;
- recognise the standing of any person to participate in ABA investigations and hearings. □