

Putting Ham Radio in the Cable Spotlight

Promoting ham radio on your favorite cable channel.

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“We’ll be right back after this commercial announcement.” But wait; don’t push that remote control button yet! Right there, on the screen, you see hams having fun on Field Day, helping out during an emergency and doing other exciting things with Amateur Radio.

How can this be? Is the ARRL paying for national commercials? No — you have probably just watched an announcement inserted by your local cable company at the request of a local Amateur Radio operator like you.

How can you get Amateur Radio announcements on your local cable television system? Here’s the way it is done. Local cable companies carry many satellite delivered channels on their channel lineup. These include channels like TNT, Lifetime, CNN and ESPN. As commercial channels, they carry (duh...) commercials. These channels run their own commercials most of the time, but they permit the local cable operator to retain a few minutes each hour for their own announcements.

Because they are made “available” to the cable operator, these openings are called “avails.” Cable operators sell these avails to local advertisers. Because there are so many avails, however, they are rarely all filled with purchased announcements. If an avail is not sold, a cable operator can insert a *public service announcement* (PSA) into the open slot. A PSA is an announcement provided by a non-profit or community organization. The cable operator donates the air time for the PSA. Most PSAs are 30 seconds in length.

Here is where we have an opportunity to promote Amateur Radio at virtually no charge. The key is to have a technically correct and compelling PSA for the cable system to insert into a national satellite channel when they have an opening. The ARRL can supply you with high quality PSAs in several different formats. You can preview



them on www.arrl.org/pio. First, check what video format(s) the cable system needs and then contact Allen Pitts, WIAGP, Media & PR Manager at ARRL HQ, w1agp@arrl.org. Allen will mail you a CD or DVD of the PSA — they cannot be easily downloaded because the high quality video makes them into very large files.

Here are some tips for getting your PSAs on your local cable system:

- Explain why the public service announcement is applicable to the cable operator’s subscribers. For example: There is a need for additional licensed amateurs to help with emergency communications in the cable operator’s coverage area.

- Have a visual connection to a local organization. You can customize some ARRL PSAs to your local needs by adding the name of your club, ARES® unit or other Amateur Radio endeavor to the PSA. A friend in the production department at a cable company or broadcaster can help to customize or “tag” the avail.

- You can customize or produce a PSA yourself. The availability of high quality video editing software, such as *iMovie* or *Windows Movie Maker*, along with the downward spiral in prices for “prosumer” video gear, make it easy to create your own content. Take special care with lighting and audio. The more professional the product looks, the more likely it will be to get aired.

- Contacting a radio amateur who works for the cable company is a good way to find out the specifics about running a PSA on a particular cable company.

- Do not just mail the cable operator the PSAs. They will probably end up in the trash

bin. Mail them after you have spoken with someone directly at the cable system and have a specific contact name and at least a commitment to look at them.

- Whenever possible, have the PSAs prepared in a video format that the cable system requires.

Most cable systems today recommend that PSAs be on a DVD. Don’t expect to have the cable operator translate them to their local format.

- Don’t expect to have the PSAs returned to you. Keep the master yourself and supply the cable operator with a copy. Make sure that the copy is of good quality.

- Have the PSAs clearly labeled and tightly affix labels to the media and its case. At the minimum, the label should include: PSA title, run time, producing organization, local contact name, phone number and/or e-mail, and start and end dates when the PSAs should be run. You don’t want a Field Day PSA still running in July!

- Make sure that the PSA timing is accurate. PSAs are inserted with automated equipment. A 30 second announcement should be 30 seconds on the dot. The run time should be accurate within half a second or less. The cable operator may not run the PSA if the timing is too far off.

- Make sure that you have the rights to run the material that you are using whether you produced the PSA yourself or if it is supplied by an outside entity like the ARRL.

- Follow up with a thank you in writing to the cable company management for running the PSA and donating the broadcast time. They will appreciate it.

Good luck, and thanks for helping to promote Amateur Radio and the ARRL. Thanks to Scott Westerman, W9WSW, of Comcast Cable for his assistance with this article.

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