

BACKING THE RIGHT HORSE

The world of broadcast is moving so quickly that no one can claim to know what international broadcasting will look like in ten or twenty years, let alone predict what the big story might be next year. Faced with this uncertainty, trialling options is crucial for broadcasters, says **Bryan Coombes**, Director of Broadcast at **VT Communications**



The growth of digital media has presented a huge range of technologies that increase the opportunity for broadcasters to change the way they interact with their audiences. Traditional short wave can now be supported by any number of additional media channels. All have potential but not all will be part of the future broadcast landscape. The problem is that no one is really sure which ones they will be. It gets even more complicated as audience behaviour changes by geography and over time so it's a constantly moving target. The truth is that we simply don't know what will be the next Betamax and what will be the next VHS of the broadcast world. At the moment, the biggest question for broadcasters is simply 'which horse should we back'? If resource was unlimited the answer would be simple – 'all of them'.

This is part of a much wider issue for broadcasters around the world. Whilst some of the larger broadcasters can look at all the

options around them, trial various combinations and decide upon their future technology strategy from an informed position, the same option is not always available to small to medium-sized organisations. Yes, the growing market for digital media technologies does offer huge opportunities for the broadcast community but there is a real danger it may pass some broadcasters by because it is more difficult for them to make long term financial commitments to technologies they have not had the chance to trial. Risk is not a game that small broadcasters can afford to play.

REDUCE THE RISK

There is undoubtedly a need for broadcasters to trial new technologies before they commit to the required long-term investments in hardware, software and people with the relevant skills. They need the opportunity to reduce their risk. They need the chance to take an informed position on the new opportunities offered by digital. Ultimately, they need a level playing field.

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This is why VT Communications launched its 'Taste of Digital' service at IBC this year. We take a long term partnership approach to working with broadcasters and they rely on us to guide them through the challenges of a rapidly changing broadcast market, solving problems as we go. Taste of Digital has been specifically tailored to help small to medium-sized broadcasters assess how their programming works on a digital platform, without having to invest in expensive new infrastructure or rely on a range of different suppliers. Broadcasters only need to select a programme (up to an hour a day) and they can then trial a huge range of digital media services. This can include scheduled 'live' streaming direct to a link placed on the broadcaster's website to audiences around the world, downloads from the broadcaster's website for up to three months, and subscription podcasts so that audiences can regularly receive its content with ease. The service also offers access to real user data including audience usage patterns of the digital content

to measure success and demonstrate the effectiveness of each service.

ANALOGUE HAS LIFE LEFT

While this may seem like just another short term fix, it is actually part of a broader strategy to address a wider issue – the perception that the use of short wave radio is rapidly declining. Short wave remains a cost effective method for reaching distant audiences, yet there is a perception that international broadcasting on short wave is at risk from innovative new digital opportunities. It is certainly true that in Western Europe and North America analogue short wave has declined, but once we broaden our mind to the size and complexity of the world, the reality is that reports of the death of analogue short wave are very premature. It is not a case of 'either/or'. In truth, its benefits remain as unique as they always have been. It's just been busy

finding its place amongst all the new platforms. And it's really not embarrassed to sit alongside its younger relatives of podcasts, web-streaming or TV. Of the BBC World Service figures for a weekly audience of 180+m people, over 100m are still on analogue short wave.

However, while VT Communications continue to champion the future of short wave, we also recognise that the future will include some level of digital experience. That is simply the way the market is moving. VT Communications is offering a guiding light to broadcasters to navigate to the most appropriate path and get the 'best of the new' whilst hanging onto the 'best of the old' methods of reaching their audience. Moving from traditional radio into the digital age can be a challenging prospect to some broadcasters. How can they embrace the new world of podcasts, audio-on-demand and mobile phone technology in a way

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that appeals to a new audience?

The answer is that they can't unless they can be sure of the results. This is why being able to trial ideas, technologies and new approaches make a real difference. The fear is that without help, smaller broadcasters wanting to take advantage of the market opportunities, may find themselves spending all their time identifying ways to evaluate the options and using up resources that could be channelled into doing what they do best – making compelling content for their audiences. ■



Bryan Coombes ▶

think outside the box



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