

ABC, CBS, NBC or Fox?

Stations find selling and promoting themselves difficult when their affiliation is up in the air

By David Tobenkin and Chris Stern

The network-affiliate scramble ignited last month by the Fox-New World deal has disrupted advertising, promotion and programming at the more than three dozen stations in the 17 markets affected so far (see chart, page 10).

The stations caught in the shuffle are unsure what network and programming to promote and sell as the fall season draws near. Some are faced with promoting the competition's lineup as they await word of their new affiliation. And affiliates of the big three moving to Fox are finding holes in their prime time schedule that must be filled.

"It's a difficult and challenging time for all of us," says Mike Murphy, of the Blair TV station rep firm. "Everything is up in the air."

KDFW-TV Dallas, among the CBS-to-Fox stations, will add a mix of syn-

dication and local news to compensate for the smaller Fox prime time schedule, says GM Jeff Rosser.

"We don't have to tell [advertisers] anything yet," Rosser adds. New World's purchase of the station and its shift to Fox are not expected until the spring of 1995. "We will have to start to make a lot of decisions, but not for several months."

New World's WAGA-TV is picking up the Fox affiliation in Atlanta, which means Fox eventually will have to cut loose its owned and operated station there, WATL.

Nonetheless, WATL General Manager Gene McHugh says he's operating as if nothing were happening. "I'm the Fox affiliate until I'm told further," says McHugh. "We are writing the business. That's my story and I'm sticking to it."

He assumes neither New World nor Fox is interested in switching affilia-

New net for Gaylord?

Late Friday Gaylord Broadcasting signaled that it might be getting ready to affiliate with one of the four networks, maybe CBS. The group owner asked a Texas court to confirm that its independent TV stations in Dallas, Houston and Seattle, are not "legally obligated to 'affiliate' " with the new WB network. If Gaylord can get out of its commitment to Warner Bros., the three stations, two of which are VHF, would be free to strike another deal.

The Gaylord statement said Warner Brothers has asserted a legally binding deal exists between the two companies, while Gaylord claims it has signed nothing. —GF

tions in the middle of a season, so his staff is continuing to sell fourth-quarter Fox football avails.

If customers raise questions, McHugh suggests they call WAGA-TV and ask whether that station will honor the avail if a change takes place before the spot runs on WATL.

"We're waiting for the other shoe to

ABC bags Hearst for long-term affiliation deal

Any question that Hearst Broadcasting might switch its five ABC-affiliated TV stations to another network apparently has been answered. The two companies are expected to announce this week that they have signed a long-term affiliation contract.

It's likely that Hearst—with VHF stations in Pittsburgh, Boston, Milwaukee, Baltimore, Kansas City and Dayton, Ohio—talked with NBC about switching in some markets. The two have at least one market to negotiate—Baltimore—where Hearst's WBAL-TV has had its CBS affiliation given to Group W. The move also left NBC without an affiliate.

Hearst probably also talked with Fox about Baltimore, where the fourth network would like to upgrade to a V.

But the ABC affiliation deal forecloses additional options for NBC, which in two other markets, Boston and Kansas City, has been robbed of VHF affiliates where Hearst could have supplied replacements.

In Boston, NBC now faces negotiating with the only unaffiliated VHF station owner, Edmund Ansin, who may not be inclined to make things easy for NBC and could make his WHDH-TV a Fox affiliate. Ansin's other VHF property, wsvn Miami, is now a Fox affiliate only because years ago NBC dumped the station when the network

bought another station there. Ansin declined to comment on a rumored meeting with NBC last week.

The Boston situation is further complicated by the fact that Fox already has an option to buy WFXT, a co-located U.

Fox is said still to be raiding other ABC, CBS and NBC affiliates. Tony Malara, president of CBS affiliate relations, says: "We have had a number of conversations that have indicated to us that station owners are being contacted either by Fox directly or by people who would buy the station and then move it to Fox. We are in the process of responding."

Although compensation in some markets may go down (where, for instance, a network finds itself replacing a VHF affiliate with a U), many of the handshakes being made are expensive ones. One network executive told BROADCASTING & CABLE last week it would be reasonable to assume that affiliate compensation expenses could increase by 20% over a year ago.

Taking \$100 million as a rough estimate of annual compensation expense for a network, a 20% increase would reduce operating income by \$20 million. For CBS that would work out to roughly \$1 per share, pretax. —GF

Steve McClellan and Julie Zier contributed to this story.