

Chris Lovell And Coaxial Cable: Saving The Day With Customer Service, New Ideas

By Jeffrey Milliner, Communications Coordinator
American Cable Association

Although he may not have super strength, Chris and “Coax” have taken many large leaps and bigger chances to “come to the rescue” of their company, customers and community.

Coax serves the small college town of Edinboro, PA, and Chris plays many roles other than GM for his small cable operation, which is apparent by the way he talks to his customers over the phone, at the office front desk, while working out at the local YMCA, or how he handles on-site service issues with his technical support staff. Chris even hangs a few Coaxial Cable employee uniform shirts on his door, in case he needs to do his best “Superman phone booth” impression in his office to head out into the field.

Because of its inventive thinking and creative planning, Coax plans to be one

of the first independent cable operators to transition to all-digital signals next year. With an offer to customers of three digital cable boxes at no-charge and a completely converted headend facility, Chris has shown the benefits of “thinking outside the box” when it comes to cable.

Top Services And Looking Ahead

Coax works hard to provide the best services to its local area. The company serves 4,000 cable customers and 2,000 Internet subscribers. Coax also has 230 telephone subscribers, all of which were attained without marketing or advertising support. “This is a definite sign that shows the level of satisfaction people in the community have with our service,” states Lovell. Coax is expanding its services to local businesses and, according to Chris, sees “the potential for a large amount of growth in this area soon through a developing partnership” with the business community.

Chris is currently in his eighth year working with the company as GM, following his nearly 27 years of previous cable experience. “Working in cable has been a great adventure and the constant change is extremely exciting,” says Lovell. “If you go to sleep for five minutes, the technology itself can blow right past you.”

Through his experience, Chris has discovered the importance of staying on top of the industry in all aspects and constantly keeping an open mind to new ideas in the future. “That is what keeps the industry motivating, and interesting,” says Lovell. “The most important thing in this industry is to never burn a bridge. With the industry evolving at a fast rate, I always keep

in contact with peers and vendors as a resource for information. I feel it’s important to be flexible to changes as well. As long as we in the industry can stay flexible to changes, we can adapt to them and look for solutions.”

Developing An Efficient Change To DTV

Since learning about the FCC’s mandated DTV transition, Chris has worked diligently to analyze the most efficient and easiest transition for Coax and its customers. Coax has taken the first initiative by educating its customers early and often through marketing materials and bill mailings.

One of the more difficult situations for Chris was finding a solution to converting customers to all-digital, a significant challenge for independent cable operators. “We took the time to do our homework on this issue, and found that the current system and standard industry set-top box technology we were using did not meet FCC standards, nor was it cost-efficient for our needs to digitize our system 100 percent,” said Lovell. **After reviewing a number of vendors, Coax selected Transparent Video Systems (transparentvideo.net) because of its competitive cost and system ability to provide Coax with an easy migration to a completely digital system.**

As for the upgrade to Coax’s headend, Chris said, “The head-end cost itself was not a cheap date, but where the savings came were in the cost of the set-top boxes. Now I can purchase and



Coax GM Chris Lovell is currently migrating their 4,000-subscriber system to 100 percent digital operation.



Coaxial Cable Television serves the small college town of Edinboro, Pennsylvania

provide more digital set-top boxes at a three-to-one ratio to my customers.” Chris’ efforts have shown immediate effect. Even though the digital system is currently voluntary, Coax has already converted 1,400 customers to the new boxes, a little less than one-third of its cable subscribers.

Uploading Advanced Services

Coax is continuing to expand services through its newly integrated digital system. Coax provides customers with the opportunity to enhance their cable experience through TellyTopia, a company providing systems, services and applications to television service providers. TellyTopia helped Coax provide a cross-platform video and Internet experience through televisions and computers. The service gives customers the ability to upload original video content, via YouTube.com, to their boxes and onto their screen. The process begins when customers send their video for a fee to Coax via TellyTopia over the Internet. TellyTopia then reviews and screens each video for content and downloads the videos to Coax. Coax then puts each of the approved videos onto a designated channel for its customers to watch and share. “We have referred it as YouTube on steroids,” joked Lovell. “We just went live and we are still in the Beta part of the service, but we are already collecting feedback from customers.”

The service also allows Coax to schedule specific time slots for local video content, serving as another public venue over cable for anything from local high school or college sporting events to city council meetings. The service can also lend a hand to local businesses through a designated banner area for marketing and advertising. Through this method, local businesses can display targeted ads that correspond with video being shown at that time.

Coax In The Community

Coax’s service to its community goes beyond digital cable boxes and customer service calls. Chris and his team have helped to instill the same values into the community that they practice within their cable operation. Recently, Coax provided installation and maintenance of fiber-optic cable to Edinboro University at no-charge. The University has used this generous offering to provide content and education to the community through channels Coax has offered to the University.

Coax has also helped its community literally on the football

field. Chris and Coax gave a financial donation to the local high school to assist fundraising efforts for a new turf surface on the school’s football field. This donation was of high importance to the community and helped to bring year-round use of the field for various events. “Coax is always willing to help foster different programs within the community to instill a sense that our customers are not just customers,” says Lovell. “We benefit by showing that we can take civic responsibility not only as the area’s cable company, but also as a member of the community.”

An Advocate For The Local Customer

Chris also works attentively on many federal and state issues his company faces. These issues do not always fall on his customers’ monthly bill, but affect them all the same. Chris has had a different experience in his last round of retransmission negotiations than other smaller operators may have, but recognizes that something must be done. “Retransmission agreements with our networks went very smoothly this round actually,” says Lovell. “We did not necessarily want to go the way we did, but we were fortunate that our local networks were willing to work with us. This cannot be said, however, for some of my colleagues in the industry where negotiation experiences can be downright hideous.”

The same could be said for his various encounters involving programmers with program tying and bundling practices. Chris also understands something has to be done to assist the small operator in acquiring quality programming through reasonable costs without forced bundling. “What could be really important and vital for the smaller cable operator would be a set standard on rates without bundling or tying other services to channels,” Lovell explains. “Whenever you are forced into a bundling challenge, you are left somewhat without choice.”

Chris Lovell and Coaxial Cable have made many efforts to raise the bar on how a small cable operation can be run when it comes to community involvement, customer service and issue awareness. Because of these efforts, Coax is ahead of the curve, embracing new ideas and doing the homework to find the best solutions and services for its customers.

“The key is doing what has to be done to accomplish great customer service,” says Lovell. □



Part of the Coax fleet serving the college and resort community of Edinboro, located in Erie County Pennsylvania.