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WHAT THE INDUSTRY READS FIRST

TIS24: Operators Contemplate AI, Mobile Moves

Everybody has AI on the brain, from the largest to the smallest operators attending **NCTC** and **ACA Connects'** annual Independent Show in Nashville this week.

"Where AI [can be] really helpful is how can it automate the really easy things that then free up people to do the hard stuff, to take those really difficult phone calls. I don't want phone calls from customers that are calling to pay their bills. I want calls from customers that have a problem or a question," **MCTV** CEO *Katherine Gessner* said during Tuesday's opening session.

Breezeline is further along with AI, already using a chatbot to field customer inquiries. The result? "Fewer overall calls, but when they call, they talk to us longer," said *Heather McCallion*, Breezeline's VP of New Business and Business Transformation. Those longer calls are because the baseline calls are weeded out and the issues making it to agents are more complex.

Not everyone's convinced. *Phil Spencer*, former **Vyve** CEO, is worried about that loss of human connection. He pointed to calls he would listen in on where he'd be so impressed with customer service reps' empathy and connection that he'd share the conversations with the company as an example of doing business right. "We've driven culture around taking care of the customer, No. 1. Now, let's just drive revenue on that. Now all of a sudden, we're starting to focus on the expense side [with AI]," he said. "We are using AI for customer service in some areas. My concern is that we not lose that culture of

service. Let's not lose it, because that's going to differentiate us, particularly in a heavily competitive market. My thing is, let the big guys use AI and try to struggle through that. Let us local people have the conversations and talk to you."

McCallion countered that there are different ways to use AI, including monitoring and listening to calls. "It can tell you the emotions throughout the phone call—the moment when that emotion went up or down. So, to your point, it actually can help you amplify certain cultural elements or behaviors," she said. She also cautioned that Generative AI is only as good as the data put in there. "What's important to remember is AI is just a function of machine learning, so if you don't feed it the right information, if all of the solutions that go into the large language model are wrong, then it's going to spit out the wrong answer," she said. "So it's an incredible amount of work to actually get to the point where you can start leveraging AI the right way."

Another emerging area on the minds of operators at the Independent Show is mobile. Breezeline is among the members who've opted into NCTC's MVNO to launch a wireless phone offering. It began with a launch to employees in March and a slow rollout to customers. McCallion said it's been a good experience, tipping her hat to NCTC's partners, **Reach** and **AT&T**, for their agility.

One of the surprises for Breezeline has been the shift needed in marketing. "We expected that the vast majority of our customers would come from existing customers and that

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is indeed what's happening. But the way we market and talk to those customers needs to be different," she said. "We don't have the marketing teams necessarily built up to fire off emails and new offers every other day, which is in fact, if you watch what Charter, Comcast, Verizon and AT&T do. It's what's required. It's a constant shift in tone, the message, the offer, because the moments that matter providing mobile are very different than the moments that matter providing broadband—especially for existing customers who don't necessarily need to make a change."

That's one of the reasons MCTV isn't ready to hop on the mobile train right now. Gessner said it's focused on completing its FTTH project and doesn't have the people bandwidth to launch it properly. "We only get one chance. If we say to the customer 'Hey, we've got mobile,' and it's a bad experience, they're never coming back," she said.

Vyve hasn't launched mobile because Spencer's business plan was to go in and upgrade systems, grow, drive cash flow and exit. But if he was a long-term holder, he said he'd launch mobile today, encouraging NCTC members in the room to consider it.

One of the things every operator has in common is the pressure of competition like never before. "In our industry, where we would see one or two people in the marketplace, now in some markets you guys get three or four providers. So the big piece for us is adjusting to the competition and then the cap ex required to stay up to date," said Spencer.

Even a municipal utility like Arkansas' **Conway Corp.** is feeling the pinch from challengers. "For a long time, we didn't have a lot of that competition and now we do. Our HFC plant is really, really solid. We offer 2 Gig internet throughout the city. Our market share is very solid, and we continue to grow that. We do see more competition, so trying to balance," said Conway CEO *Bret Carroll*, who said there's some "robust" internal debate over whether to convert the plant to fiber.

"We're experiencing sort of a new wave of competition. We've never had a lot of competition that was really fierce, and now we're starting to see that a little more in some of our markets, combined with stagnating customer growth," said MCTV's Gessner. "We're really focusing on how we stay relevant, how we stay competitive with the consumer."

Breezeline faced a new sense of competition when it closed on **WOW!**'s Columbus and Cleveland, OH, systems in 2022. It's learned that to stand out among competitors involves more than price wars. "Everybody can drop a price or give away gift cards, and that's an important part of the recipe. But for us, we shifted about three-and-a-half years ago to really focusing on NPS scores and taking a customer-centric approach," said McCallion.

BRONFMAN JR. ENTERS PARAMOUNT BIDDING WAR

The **Paramount** merry-go-round may never stop. *Edgar Bronfman Jr.*, who formerly led **Warner Music** and is **Fubo's** Board Executive Chairman, formally submitted an estimated \$4.3 billion offer to purchase **National Amusements**, according to a *Wall Street Journal* [report](#). Bronfman's bid includes \$2.4 billion in debt and equity in addition to \$1.5 billion contributed by Bronfman to go toward Paramount's balance sheet and potentially go toward paying down debt. Another important factor considering Paramount's [previously agreed deal](#) with **Skydance** is that Bronfman's bid includes \$400 million to cover a breakup fee. Paramount and Skydance's go-shop window expires Wednesday unless it's extended.

TIS24 CROWD ENCOURAGED TO REIMAGINE THE BUNDLE

The future of video is a problem all **Independent Show** attendees are trying to solve, but what remains true throughout the evolution of TV distribution is that content is still king. Media expert *Evan Shapiro* delivered a keynote Tuesday about the future of programming, acknowledging content reigns supreme while data is its bloodline. For companies enduring customers leaving the pay TV ecosystem, the equation then turns to what other options companies could offer beyond broadband. "You cannot rely on the profits of broadband alone to generate enough investment to make the changes you need to adapt to the new users you need to get," he said. "Broadband is a great product and is the center of a great bundle. You have to reimagine what that bundle is for today's customers." The bundling of cable, internet and traditional telephony has been going away, yet customers are more likely to stay with a company if that company offers multiple products that one uses regularly. Shapiro pointed to Disney's bundling of Disney+, Hulu and ESPN+ in a variety of ways as a tactic to mitigate churn. Another example, which spans more than just SVOD offerings, is Apple and its bundling of utilities like Apple TV, Apple Arcade and Apple News. The key is making it as smooth of an experience for consumers wanting to consume different types of media. "In the last couple of years, consumers are cutting back," Shapiro said. "This may seem like a good thing. We are overwhelmed with media and data, but for our ecosystem, if you're cutting back because of frustration, that's our fault and that's our problem. It's less revenue, it's less advertising, it's less subscriptions."

YOUTUBE TV ROLLS OUT SUNDAY TICKET ENHANCEMENTS

With Fall on the horizon, so is football season. **YouTube TV** is

prepping for its tailgate festivities with a slew of new features for **NFL Sunday Ticket**, including enhancements to its multiview feature that debuted last season. This year, users of both **YouTube** and YouTube TV will get multiview. Sunday Ticket subscribers will be able to create any available combination of two, three or four games accessed via Sunday Ticket, but if viewers want to watch games on their local station, the options become more limited. Fans will be able to see live stats and scores from other games and watch key plays in addition to hiding scores for specific teams through “spoiler mode” and having more advanced playback controls pertaining to broadcast delay. Additionally, for those eagerly watching their fantasy football lineups, NFL Fantasy and Yahoo Fantasy users can utilize Fantasy View to see key plays and combinations tailored toward a user’s fantasy lineup.

MORE AI AT TIS24

During a keynote Tuesday, technology marketing strategist *Crystal Washington* told the crowd that now is not the time to wait and react as generative AI blossoms. While many are still trying to wrap their arms around the uses of AI and its potential benefits, the technology is in a formative stage from a business aspect. “We can’t wait around being told what to do. We actually have to make the best practices,” Washington said. “I’m not a fan of folks saying, ‘This is a new technology, let’s find a problem to mash it.’ That’s not a good use of your time. You already know what areas you might be able to help within your organization. Let’s see if there’s a way for generative AI to address that.” She listed four early areas in which generative AI can be beneficial to businesses. It can enhance network traffic management by looking at where users are moving to based on something that’s happening in real time. It can also give companies the option of adding a customer service chatbot that can deliver instant answers to common questions, but the caveat to that is it’s only as good as the data it’s given. Customer sentiment is another aspect that generative AI can assist with as it can obtain large amounts of data without needing direct user input. Lastly, it can be utilized with general tasks to save time.

DIRECTV STREAM ON PELOTON

DirectTV Stream announced a new feature that will allow subscribers to watch live programming on **Peloton** equipment. The “Just Guidance” feature lets users access live shows, news, sports, and more while following routines created by Peloton’s expert instructors. DirectTV Stream is available on Peloton Bike, Tread, and Row machines.

TIS24 NOTEBOOK

Warner Bros. Discovery welcomed the crowd to Nashville on Monday night with an opening night party that included food truck fare (street tacos, fried chicken and *Bobby Flay’s* margarita recipe). The show floor opened Tuesday afternoon to a bustling

crowd. Attendance looks to be a up a little bit from 2023. Most of the big programmers were there with booths, including **AMC Networks**, **Paramount**, **Fox** and **NBCUniversal**, as well as some of the smaller nets (**JLTV**, **Reelz**, **MavTV** and **Great American Media**). A few Indy Show mainstays were missing, including **INSP** and for the second year in a row, **Hallmark Channel**. Plenty of tech vendors, of course, were also exhibiting. The biggest line we saw on the floor, however, was at **Outdoor Sportsman Group’s** booth, where folks got their photos taken with “Duck Dynasty” star *Willie Robertson*. Robertson also spoke at Tuesday’s lunch, taking the crowd through his family’s story of getting Duck Commander duck calls into a handful of stores to becoming an actual dynasty and reality TV family through **Outdoor Channel** and **A&E**. He quipped that the ratings the show brought in during its height on A&E were akin to what everything on cable collectively does. He’s not far off, with Season 4 delivering 11.8 million for its premiere in 2014.

FIBER FRENZY

C Spire continues to expand its home fiber network in Mississippi, this time in Senatobia. Over 1,110 residents will gain access to C Spire’s fiber network. Initial network construction is expected to be completed over the next six months in the first three areas of Senatobia. C-Spire expanded its fiber service into Mississippi in 2014 and now has a network spanning more than 150 communities in Mississippi, Alabama, Florida, and Tennessee.

RATINGS

Though news networks still make up the top of the weekly ratings among cable nets, the sports nets are looming with football season nearing. **Fox News** topped primetime for the week of Aug. 12-18 with 2.27 million viewers P2+ followed by **MSNBC** with 1.43 million. Boosted by preseason play, **NFL Network** came third in prime with 794,000, while **CNN** and **ESPN** filled the rest of the top five at 785,000 and 770,000, respectively. Fox News (1.4 million) and MSNBC (943,000) were the top two nets in total day. CNN crept up to third with 562,000, while ESPN came fourth with 436,000. **HGTV** rounded things out at 367,000. – The Tigers’ extra-innings win over the Yankees on Sunday was the most-watched MLB Little League Classic event ever with an average of 2.17 million viewers across **ESPN** and the “KidsCast” altcast on **ESPN2**, according to **Nielsen**. That’s up 39% compared to last year’s Little League Classic. Viewership for this year’s contest peaked at 2.37 million viewers at 9:30pm. – **ChimeTV-GoldenTV** reported record ratings for their exclusive coverage of the 2024 Filipino World Series. It did so well the network is developing a documentary about the World Series that’s slated to air on ChimeTV powered by GoldenTV on Aug 30. Viewership hours for the inaugural baseball event increased by 42% from the previous month, and unique viewership rose by 167%. Playoff games also saw a 187% increase in viewership on GoldenTV’s FAST Channel, with an average returning viewer rate of 4.5.