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Small Market Survival Guide

FM Translators for Better Coverage

by Judith Gross

When the FCC opened the window to new translators in the “Great Transmitter Wave” of 2003, something else flew in with the thousands of applications: new opportunity for small market FMs.

While the majority of the 2003 applications came from non-commercial and religious stations, shrewd FM owners also saw it as a chance to fill in portions of their contours, penetrate population pockets and expand a listener base to attract ad dollars.

East Catches Up With West

“It’s not as unusual west of the Mississippi as it is in the eastern part of the U.S.,” says Kevin Fitzgerald, Director of Engineering for Times-Shamrock stations in the Scranton, Pennsylvania region. “FMs with signals in mountainous areas have been using translators to fill in coverage for years.”

Fitzgerald says the terrain in the Scranton Wilkes-Barre market offers such challenges: a steep ridge of hills around the city. He installed translators for WEZX-FM to counter multipath reflecting off nearby Montage mountain, and for better coverage on the University of Scranton campus.

Multiple Translators

Fitzgerald is also Director of Engineering for Equinox Broadcasting’s WMTT-FM and WPHD-FM in Elmira, and technical consultant for Equinox’s Binghamton New

York stations. Each has multiple translators. WMTT, which has translators since the ‘90s, has a total of seven.

Not That Uncommon

Another engineer in small markets in the Catskill region of New York uses translators on FM stations for the same reasons. Don Perkins is Manager of Operations and Engineering for a Radio Group with stations in Norwich, Delhi, Deposit, Oneonta and Walton.

Perkins also put translators on WKXZ-FM in Norwich to fill in shadows and get a better audience on the Colgate University Campus. He also installed a translator for WDHI-FM in Delhi to fill in its signal in Oneonta, 30 miles away.

Perkins is also Chief Engineer for a station in Binghamton – WLTB-FM, which also has a translator.

“We moved the city of license from Owego to Johnson City, 25 miles east, and at the same time we put a translator at the original site,” Perkins says.

The Gear Isn’t That Expensive

He notes that the translator gear itself is not expensive, but renting space on towers adds to the budget. “Renting tower space could cost a couple of hundred dollars a month. If the station has multiple translators, that adds up.”

Both Perkins and Fitzgerald said stations need patience when it comes to obtaining translator frequencies.

A station first has to propose a translator and then make sure there is no conflict with another station’s

proposed translator. If there is a conflict, the stations will try to engineer a solution. If no resolution is reached, there’s an auction.

With the complexities of the process, plus the expense of tower rental, do the advantages of translators for FMs in smaller markets pay off?

Is It Worth The Cost?

“Is the better coverage going to pay for itself in ad revenues, and if so, how do you prove that?” asks Perkins. Fitzgerald points to the Elmira, New York market, “The top four FMs in the Elmira market each have one or more translators. WMTT, with its seven translators, has definitely benefited; I’ve seen the ratings go up,” says Fitzgerald.

He observes that small groups and independent owners are more likely to add translators than large corporate owners, who already have a great deal of power and coverage in multiple stations per market. “Translators help us level the playing field,” Fitzgerald says.

A Lot of Potential

But the true genius in adding translators to FM stations may lie in a much newer application: HD radio.

The FCC now allows stations who go digital to broadcast the programming from their HD channels on their translators, as an analog signal, if they choose.

This means digital programming can be heard in analog even by those who don’t yet own an HD receiver and a station can broadcast multiple programming formats in a single market, with a Classic Rock station also programming jazz, or country to reach different audiences. It’s like getting two or three stations for the price of one.

Judith Gross has spent over three decades in radio. She operates her own marketing and freelance writing business, JG Creative Media, in Binghamton, NY.