

The One-Man Government Channel

BY GEOFF POISTER

Do you really need to have a staff to run a television channel?

The answer to this question can be found in Peekskill, N.Y., population 25,000, where an enterprising individual had a vision.

Michael Miner grew up in Peekskill, and wanted to do something good for his town. He had a professional background in broadcast television and found the existing government channel to be sadly lacking.

"There was one VHS playback machine and an antiquated graphics machine for bulletin board announcements," he said.

Miner approached the City Council with a proposal to offer some real programming and submitted a bid to execute the plan.

"It was a low bid, but it was a foot in the door," Miner said. "As time went on the contract expanded and we started producing a lot of programming."

"You can't go wrong with kids."

—Mike Miner

But when Miner uses the word "we," what he really means is "me, myself and I." For the most part, he has been running the city's government channel by himself. (Although he is quick to stress that none of this would be possible without the support and goodwill of the community, including the mayor, council and sports commission.) The City of Peekskill covers his salary, and he makes efficient use of cable franchise money provided by Cablevision and Verizon FiOS to buy equipment.

The studio is housed in City Hall and that is where programs, such as the mayor's weekly show, are produced.



Mike Miner at the controls

The Council Chamber is also set up for covering sessions. And just this year, he has rigged the town's baseball field for full multi-camera sports coverage.

The programming, which is on for about 18 hours a day starting at 7 a.m., includes all public meetings and work sessions, plus all of the various town commission meetings. Then there are edited shows such as the Mayor's "Inside City Hall," press conferences, ribbon cuttings, and special events throughout the town.

Miner carefully selected an array of equipment that could get the job done with sufficient quality, but at a price that would fit the financial constraints. He has been able to take advantage of the cost revolution of the digital age, where high-end prosumer equipment rivals the quality of traditionally more expensive gear.

For council meetings, they have three Canon 1-chip robotic cameras with a Telemetric controller, Videonics switcher and Leightronix Net 164 router. For work sessions, Miner uses JVC 110 and 210 ENG Cameras, which also are used for field ENG/EFP with a NewTek TriCaster switcher and a Sony audio board. He has recently installed a Leightronix Nexus digital video server for digital playback.

But what Miner really talks about with pride now is

the baseball field setup, which just went online this spring and is used to broadcast local high school and college games.

"We had a small production truck and three or four folks I had to pay," Miner recalled. "It was expensive, so I convinced the city to pay for a permanent installation. There was a fund for the ball field and they agreed to setting up five cameras and slow motion replay. The cable company installed fiber so we can feed back to City Hall for broadcast and streaming on Internet."

The five BRC-300 Sony cameras are robotic and housed in domes for protection. Miner uses a Vaddio camera control system to execute the coverage.

"I can (remotely) pan, tilt, zoom and focus the cameras," Miner said. "One is placed center field, and the others behind home plate, first and third, and one looking out from the bull pen. A lot of shots are set shots. Except when the ball is hit I control the camera behind the plate to follow the ball. We also have graphics and two-angle replay. It's a really neat consolidated controller. The system eliminates the need for setup and breakdown. I can show up five minutes before the game and start going."

So with the basic manpower of one, Miner reaches his audience on channels provided by Cablevision and Verizon FiOS, as well as live streaming on the town website.

And how much did this all cost?

"I would say about \$100,000 at City Hall and \$70,000 at the ball field, so about \$170,000 altogether," Miner said. "We have a lot going on for that price."

To manage the operation alone, Miner has taken advantage of new technology, such as the Leightronix Nexus Digital Video Server.

"The beauty of the new server system is that it's all programmable," Miner said. "I can do it from home if I need to. I don't have a master control operator sitting there making sure everything is going well. But with the server it's almost a perfect run."

The server also provides weather and news feeds that can be used to fill any down time.

"The default is it goes to PSAs or weather," Miner said. "So it's a seamless flow and makes it easier for people like myself."

Although Miner doesn't have ratings or viewership data, he knows by personal contact with members of the community that the channel is watched frequently.

"The viewership is high because we really don't have local radio or local newspaper. It's really a county driven media including the local news station," Miner said. "And news is pretty much bad news most of the time. It's really my job to promote the positive in the city and make people aware of what's coming up."



One of the Canon cameras at the ballfield

Miner's advice for anyone who wants to give this a try?

"I would first try to get solid support from community and powers that be. But also get volunteers who are dedicated. And work with kids. You can't go wrong with kids. It's a great PR move for the city, but also the parents who are taxpayers really enjoy seeing their children. And you don't need to spend a heck of a lot of money to get things done. Start small and add on."

The Peekskill Government Channel is non-commercial, so the motivation is about things less tangible than money.

"I was born and raised in the town," Miner said. "It's much more than just a job. It's about seeing the people you have known since you were a kid and providing a service to the community." ★

Michael Miner can be reached at minervideo@optonline.net.

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