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Time Warner may be 'Buffy' slayer



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Has *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* met her match? She can outwit, outlast and outslay Spike, Glory and the devilish Drusilla. She has vanquished the menacing mayor of Sunnydale. But she's yet to face her toughest foe: Time Warner Cable in Cincinnati.

In September, *Buffy* jumps from the WB to the UPN network. In Cincinnati, the Sarah Michelle Gellar show moves from WSTR-TV (Channel 64) to low-power WBQC-TV (Channel 25), which Time Warner doesn't offer.

For 10 years, Time Warner has refused to carry the Golf Manor station. But that hasn't stopped the cable company from boasting in TV commercials that Time Warner carries "ALL local channels." The misleading spots even run on Channel 25.

When you call Time Warner's customer service folks to ask about Channel 25, you may hear more misinformation.

A *Buffy* fan who called Time Warner last week was told Channel 25 was "an Indianapolis station, and that's why they couldn't carry us," reports Matthew Gray, the Channel 25 program director who spoke to the *Buffy* fan.

"That was a new one for us," Mr. Gray says. "We've heard that they said we were a Dayton station before."

Alexandra Stevenson, an Anderson Township *Buffy* fan, was told by a Time Warner customer service representative that the cable company "had tried and tried to reach an agreement with them and never could."

High rent district

That's not the whole story. Time Warner has repeatedly rebuffed Channel 25's offer to give its programming free to the cable company. Time Warner's counter-offer was that Channel 25 should pay more than \$1 million to rent channel space at infomercial rates, says Elliott Block, Channel 25 owner and general manager.

Some deal, eh? Suddenly Sunnydale seems small potatoes to a butt-kicking demon destroyer.

Virgil Reed, Cincinnati Time Warner president and general manager, says he has offered to carry Channel 25's two-hour UPN prime-time schedule — but not the full lineup 24 hours a day. (His infomercials and home shopping channels are better programming than Channel 25's *Touched by an Angel*, *7th Heaven*, *Diagnosis Murder*, *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, *Buzz Lightyear*, *Recess* and University of Kentucky basketball?)

"If we could make the right deal, we could find enough time to put the (UPN) network on," Mr. Reed says. "But they want us to take them as a whole channel, on basic cable, for free. And I don't have any room on basic."

Nothing illegal

Corporate executives also have been negotiating with UPN to bring the network to many Time Warner systems across the country. "It's not for the lack of trying on our part," Mr. Reed says.

Time Warner hasn't done anything illegal. Federal law requires that cable systems "must carry" all local full-power stations, the big stations that reach two dozen counties. They're not required to carry low-power stations that barely cover one county.

"Time Warner hasn't broken the law," Mr. Block says. "They have decided not to carry me, and I wish it wasn't that way. We're not "must carry." We're "should carry." "

Mr. Reed also says his TV commercial stating that Time Warner carries "all local channels" will be changed so the video and audio will say "all local full-power stations."

It's confusing, Mr. Reed says, "and we're going to fix that."

Decade of frustration

Time Warner has ignored Channel 25, while Northern Kentucky, Delhi Township and Lebanon cable systems added the station. Time Warner even spurned Channel 25 when it was affiliated with a sister company, the Warner Bros. (WB) network in 1997-98.

A decade of frustration led Mr. Block to describe the relationship with Time Warner as "The War" on his Web site (www.wbqc.com).

Voyager and *WWF Smackdown* fans have wanted to pound a stake into Time Warner's heart for years. Now *Buffy* strolls into UPN in a two-year deal announced last week. UPN also has dibs on WB's *Angel* and *Roswell*, if canceled by WB on May 15.

You'd think a cable company losing business to satellite dishes would jump at a chance to add programming — for free — demanded by its customers.

Maybe Time Warner will change its mind after reading that Mr. Block spoke to the Dish Network about satellite carriage last week at the National Association of Broadcasters convention.

Channel 25 didn't deserve cable carriage when it aired more black-and-white shows than color ones. But *The Untouchables*, *Dick Tracy* and Roy Rogers have been replaced by *Mo'Nisha*, *The Hughleys*, *Girlfriends*, UK basketball, *Benson*, *Outer Limits* and *WWF Smackdown*.

For fall, Channel 25 will add *The X-Files* and *Star Trek: Voyager* reruns. And *Buffy*, who may finally have met her match.

To comment: *Buffy* and UPN fans should address letters to Virgil Reed, president and general manager, Time Warner Cable of Cincinnati, 11252 Cornell Park Drive., Cincinnati 45242-1812. And send a copy to me.