

Netlets dealing for affiliates

UPN buys stations in Seattle, West Palm Beach; WB about to buy in Portland; both looking at Orlando

By Steve McClellan

NEW YORK

WB executives say this will be the year they dramatically strengthen their network's affiliate ranks, but Paramount was making all the moves last week, striking deals to acquire stations in 12th-ranked Seattle and 45th-ranked West Palm Beach, Fla.

The moves were seen as signals that Warner and UPN will be butting heads in a number of markets as both move to shore up distribution. The West Palm Beach deal signals the escalating competition between WB and UPN, sources say.

In that deal, the Paramount Station Group (PSG) agreed to buy WTVX(TV) from Paxson Communications for

\$34.2 million. The purchase was seen as a preemptive move to block WB from the market. Sources confirm that PSG intends to assign the station to a third party before the transaction closes. (Warner could still acquire Paxson's WBBF(TV), also for sale in the West Palm Beach market.)

Sources say Paramount also is talking with Meredith Broadcasting about buying or trading for a station in 22-ranked Orlando, where Meredith has to spin off either CBS affiliate WCPX-TV or Fox affiliate WOFL(TV). Sources say WB also is



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looking at Orlando, either through the station group that WB President Jamie Kellner is putting together with other investors, or possibly through a separate investor group that would have WB backing.

In Seattle, Paramount agreed to acquire Gaylord's KSTW(TV), the current CBS affiliate, which will switch to UPN, in a

three-way swap with A.H. Belo and Cox Broadcasting. Earlier, Gaylord had agreed to sell the station to Cox. So before PSG acquires KSTW, it will trade KMOV(TV) St. Louis to Belo for KIRO-TV. Then it will swap KIRO-TV to Cox for KSTW plus cash (for a total \$160 million). KIRO-TV once again will become a CBS affiliate.

The deal will make PSG the seventh-largest broadcast group, covering 19.4% of the country.

Meanwhile, the Kellner-led WB group soon is expected to file an application for its first station, KWBP(TV) Portland. Sources say the group hopes to seal a deal soon for a group of five stations, some of which already are affiliated with The WB; the others will convert after the acquisition. The Kellner group ultimately hopes to acquire at least 12 stations.

"They're both out there searching high and low for station-buying opportunities," says one network source. "Paramount has the upper hand because they have a well-established group, so they can buy as well as swap."

But WB is exploiting all opportunities, including looking for possible investors (outside the Kellner-led group), to help buy stations. It's also helping existing affiliates apply for new stations that would align with The WB. Pappas Telecasting, for example, has 15 new applications at the FCC, and company owner Harry Pappas says all will become WB affiliates when they are approved by the FCC. ■

Connie & Maury find Hartford home

HOLLYWOOD—After extensive presentations to broadcasters at last month's NATPE convention, DreamWorks Television is quietly lining up stations for its upcoming strip hosted by Connie Chung and Maury Povich.

Among the first to commit a prime access slot to the half-hour strip for fall 1998 is Post-Newsweek Stations' CBS affiliate WFSB(TV) Hartford, Conn. DreamWorks officials declined to comment, but some outlets in the Young and Gannett broadcast groups are said to be interested in the show.

"We think Connie and Maury are two talented folks who will do a top-notch show and get a lot of [audience] sampling," said Bill Ryan, president of Post-Newsweek Stations.

DreamWorks is still shopping for a distribution partner on the show, but the heads of the studio's syndication unit—Bob Jacquemin and Ken Solomon—have been on the road for the past two weeks negotiating station deals. The company has also retained syndication veteran Jim Martz, formerly a senior executive with Twentieth Television, to help clear the ambitious project.

While the momentum is building as broadcasters look ahead to 1998, it's still unclear where the Chung/Povich news magazine will land in the crucial top three markets. CBS and NBC O&O groups appear to be the only options, as the ABC O&Os have re-upped for three more years with King World for *Jeopardy!* and *Wheel of Fortune*. The Fox-owned stations have invested heavily in, and scored big with, off-network sitcoms in access, as have the Tribune and Chris Craft/United groups.

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