Fox TV station WGMB moving, to start local news show

By CHAD CALDER
Advocate business writer

Fox 44 WGMB-TV is building a studio and newsroom in its new office on Perkins Road and will begin airing a local news broadcast during the first quarter of next year.

General Manager Damian Calato said the station will hire about 20 people for its news division and start a nightly half-hour broadcast at 9 early next year.

One local analyst said that while any start-up in an established market faces hurdles, there is room for a third television news cast in Baton Rouge.

Fox 44, along with Warner Bros. affiliate WBBR-10 and NBC affiliate WVLN-33, are moving from 2220 Essen Lane to the former Ochsner clinic building at 1000 Perkins Road by the end of the year.

The building was purchased from Ochsner this week for $1.6 million. Calato said the expansion of the building to include its studio will increase the 11,000-square-foot building by about 5,000 square feet. He estimated the renovations and construction of the studio will be at least $500,000.

He said that while the station was already considering a nightly broadcast, Fox began making mandatory news broadcasts part of its new affiliate agreements last year.

Calato said Fox 44's newcast will be able to compete with the those of ABC affiliate WBRZ-2 and CBS affiliate WAFB-9 because it will air an hour earlier.

Fox affiliates "are the first ones with the news at night, and it's an alternative for those who don't want to wait until later," he said.

Calato said the station is making a format that would include an extra half-hour segment after the news that would be devoted to a single issue, such as the day's top story.

Other ideas unique to this market are being considered, though he said it is too early to get into details.

For their part, WAFB-9 and WBRZ-2 were unfazed by the announcement.

"We find that competing with other news organizations makes us better," said Ronald Winders, WAFB-9's vice president and general manager, "the more the merrier."

Winders said WAFB-9's newscast is the company's most important product — and its resources are invested accordingly.

"Half of the staff is in news, weather and sports," he said.

While he would not disclose how much his station spends on its news or how many people staff its newsroom, he said it is at levels difficult for a start-up to match.

"Fox normally only does one newscast a day, and for them to put something like that together is just going to be a tremendous drain on their resources," he said.

News

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1C

Pat Cheramie, general manager for WBRZ-2, said that if Fox 44's newscast targets the youth and black audiences its other shows do, it should be able to carve out a niche for itself.

As for direct head-to-head competition, Cheramie points out that WVLN-33's predecessor, WBST-33, tried unsuccessfully to do so in the late 1980s and failed.

David Kurpius, professor of broadcast journalism at LSU's Manship School of Mass Communication, said that despite the difficulties of going up against two established players with more than 40 years in the market, Fox still has a chance.

"I think there's certainly an opportunity for another or even two stations to start a newscast," he said.

"The earlier broadcast catches the people who want to go to bed earlier and don't want to have the television on all night," he said.

Kurpius said Fox 44 will be at a disadvantage, however, unless it can put a familiar face behind the anchor desk, something not likely to happen.

A shortage of local file footage and contacts will also be a hindrance, he said.

When asked how a third newscast could change the local market, Kurpius explained there are three archetypes, called market positions, in the TV news business.

"They are:

- Public Affairs, which is generally heavy on coverage and analysis of government and politics.
- Flash 'n Trash, which focuses on crime and disasters with a focus on conflict. These stations are usually short on context and perspective.
- Community Service, which focuses on community service events, such as breast cancer awareness week or the Special Olympics. "It's the we're-your-friend, we're-your-neighbor perspective," he said.

Kurpius said that because they are the only two local stations, WAFB and WBRZ are not forced to associate themselves closely with any one particular market position.

The introduction of a third newscast, he said, could be enough to do just that.

"I think what this is doing is to force the other stations to more clearly define their image," he said.

A fourth market position, which Kurpius said is still emerging, is a community-based approach that relies on indepth reporting in communities generally overlooked by traditional newscasts.

He said NBC affiliate KRON in San Francisco, owned in part by the San Francisco Chronicle, and WFAA in Dallas are examples of stations that have staked out this market position.

KRON recently won an award for a series on race relations. WFAA won one for its look at heroin use in the suburbs.

"A market like this would benefit from that approach," Kurpius said.