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Hoffarth: Media intervention needed in Dodgers, SportsNet LA mess

By Tom Hoffarth, Los Angeles Daily News

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Public shaming, private ambivalence and all other kinds of agitated media verbiage have done so, so much to resolve this royally mucked-up distribution discussion involving the Dodgers, Time Warner Cable and SportsNet L.A.

Next up: A media-savvy intervention.

It's been strangely quiet a month out from the start of the regular season and days away from SportsNet L.A.'s abbreviated exhibition slate of games — we'll get to that later.

Has Think Blue TV Fatigue meant that no one's talking?

“There are a lot of things we'd like to discuss, but our lawyers and business people say we can't because it wouldn't get us

closer to a solution and would only inflame someone on the other side, so that's why we don't engage in a public war,” said Stan Kasten, the Dodgers' president and CEO, this week from Glendale, Ariz.

“But not a day, including weekends and holidays, goes by where we are not engaged into in a discussion, a meeting or a memo related to this problem.”

Kasten offers nothing else from the Dodgers' side in this, laying it at the feet of TWC and its distribution struggle, much of which hinges on DirecTV's cooperation. Charter's buyout of TWC isn't finalized (as the [FCC gets mixed signals](#)). AT&T's takeover of DirecTV [is done](#) and DirecTV CEO Mike White is out, but there's no urgency to tie things up in a pretty bow.

“With all due modesty, we are very proud of what we have accomplished in our first three years,” Kasten said, “but this is the one thing that overshadows much of that good. There is nothing more important to us than getting this done.”

TWC spokesman Andrew Fegyveresi said there have been “some conversations, but nothing new to report.” DirecTV declined comment.

So what we've got here is a failure to communicate among companies that make gobs of money in the communication business.

Conflict resolution anyone?

‘No one gets out until you grow up’

Ed Goren, the retired vice chairman of Fox Sports, has lived in Rolling Hills with DirecTV. He can't get SportsNet L.A. since his alternative cable provider, Cox, isn't on board. Neither are the outside options like Dish, Verizon FiOS or AT&T U-verse.

“Three years? I don't remember anything quite like this lasting as long as it has,” said the 71-year-old who had a four-decade run at CBS and Fox.

Goren was in the building when Fox once owned the Dodgers (1998-2004) and witnessed the last Dodgers channel-related fiasco unravel when Fox Sports West 2 launched in 1997, switched the Dodgers over from Fox Sports West, and then waited out cable operators to jump on board, but TWC as one of those who balked. The Dodgers are in his DNA — his father, Herb, used to cover the team for the New York Sun in their Brooklyn days.

“With all the money thrown around, you'd love to think somehow the Dodgers would reach out and say, ‘Guys, we've had enough. Give up a little’, for all parties. For the Dodgers to say, ‘We got our money, to hell with you,’ that's really not smart either ... There's Time Warner Cable who could say, ‘We'll cry uncle, you win, let's work a livable deal,’ even if it's for the short term. Get a better hold of things in the next go-around (of contract renewals).

“Think of how much great public relations it would be for all the groups if they just locked themselves in a room — and don't make it Beverly Hills, but go to Alaska in the middle of winter — and no one gets out until you grow up and make this work. Isn't there someone in L.A., whether it's a media executive or just a great baseball fan, who can offer to sit with multiple parties and at least give it a try?”

Congratulations, Ed, you've just been nominated the chairman. Bring along Dennis Gilbert, the former player agent and one-time Dodgers ownership suitor with whom you now share office space.

“I could be part of a team,” Goren said, “but there are a lot smarter people out there who take a legitimate shot at this.”

Goren's first stipulation in channeling new energy: “Don't include any politicians.”

What could L.A. mayor Eric Garcetti, California Gov. Jerry Brown or even Republican presidential candidate Donald “Dealmaker” Trump gain from this grandstanding opportunity?

Vin Scully, pull up a chair yourself. The Hall of Fame broadcaster, who says he's likely entering his 67th and final season, has too much class to insert himself into this storyline. But if there's a voice of reasoning that could possibly crack this, it would be his.

“If you can't find any other reason to resolve this, please do it for Scully,” Goren said.

Patch in MLB Commissioner Rob Manfred, too, even if he's gun-shy to activate his greatest resource — the “best interest of baseball” clause. Here's the nation's No. 2 TV market. How much more integrity does this compromise (see: NFL, 21-year absence)?

It would also be wise to recruit Ed Desser, the head of the L.A.-based [Desser Sports Media](#), who, with a degree in economics from UCLA, an MBA in marketing from USC and a Masters in L.A. common sense, brings familiarity.

“The irony is I know all the people involved, I understand their perspectives and the predicament created by all this,” Desser said. “If they're interested in having me mediate something, I'd be happy.”

But ...

“Having said that, it’s hard to imagine any of them modifying their positions.”

Next steps: Step it up

Our peace summit is in motion, mindful that in dealing with free-market businesses, some beholden to stockholders, not everyone has each other’s best interest in mind.

Start the discussion with these PowerPoint topics:

- On March 31, Verizon FiOS customers will switch over to Connecticut-based Frontier Communications. Consider the PR coup for that new company if it quickly added SportsNet L.A. for its existing customers as an act of good faith.

In a [fourth-quarter earnings report](#) this week, Frontier president/CEO Daniel McCarthy said the company “will be in a strong position to drive significant benefits for our customers and our stakeholders.”

Melinda White, the West Regional Area president for Frontier, told us in a statement: “We look forward to discussions with SportsNet L.A. after we complete the transaction on April 1.”

- Remind consumers they “can’t” and “don’t” need clarification. They have more of a choice than they care to admit.

When Charter said it was buying TWC last year, it immediately added SNLA and the customer base in the Dodgers’ TV territory went to 60 percent saturation.

However, there are an estimated 90 percent who actually can access either TWC, Charter or Bright House on the Dodgers’ grid. It just takes a steady nerve to walk away from a comfortable bundle deal, ditch an email address, or learn a new channel menu. So some try to wait it out.

That’s the same strategy that leaves you running on four bald tires because you won’t pay for a front-end alignment.

- Get updated numbers

DirecTV may have had defectors last summer with the resistance to SportsNet L.A. as well as the Pac-12 Network. But the recent [AT&T 2015 Q4 report](#) says DirecTV actually added 214,000 subscribers nationally. Credit “NFL Sunday Ticket” incentive.

TWC has reported “record growth” with new subscribers last year in Southern California (adding 200,000 nationally) and the company [made \\$486 million](#) in the 2015 Q4.

Desser reminds us “if there are different people with a different agenda, something could happen” in channeling positive energy into this channel swim. But as you have “the same people, the same entities, the same financials ... what’s the old expression? Insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting a different result.”

Yup, Einstein said it. And relative to everything else, that’s the most sane thing we’ve heard applied to this.

More media notes, including an update of Kings’ Hall of Famer Bob Miller, at

www.insidesocal.com/tomhoffarth

MEASURING MEDIA MOMENTUM

WHAT SMOKES

• Interesting approaches to the Angels and Dodgers for their March exhibition game TV coverage. In January, the Angels and FSW announced it would televise all 31 spring games, beginning Wednesday (noon vs. San Francisco). That's up from 29 a year ago. "It's a great way to serve Angels fans," FSN's Chris Bellitti said. "We also have the room on our schedule to accommodate the games. It's win-win for everyone." Terry Smith and Jose Mota do every game until they return to Anaheim. Two Angels-Dodgers games will be on FSW — March 9 and 11 — neither of which will be on SNLA, which last week announced it would shrink wrap its schedule from 31 last year (and 22 in 2014) [to 16](#), starting Thursday (noon vs. Chicago White Sox). TWC and the Dodgers said it had more to do with viewership numbers than sending a red flag that there was cost-cutting involved. The compromise may be better — it can condense the activity into a longer highlight package during the 7 p.m. nightly "Access SportsNet: Dodgers" show.

The cutbacks are also in line with what most other teams (not the Angels) are doing, [such as the Yankees](#) (down to 10 from 15 last year on its YES network). Vin Scully is on four spring games — Friday, March 25, plus the three Freeway Series games vs. the Angels (March 31-April 2). New play-by-play broadcaster Joe Davis will get in about a half-dozen reps, starting with March 19-20 weekend.

WHAT CHOKES

• Bid adieu to "The Beast" after Monday's lineup run-through, but it's apparent by default the Clippers will stick around on the KFWB 980-AM signal despite the new owner's foreign-language programming. Suit yourself. Among the dozen on-air and behind-the-scenes personnel seeking a new adventure are mid-day co-host Wes Clements, who signed on in August, ended up on every available local show and had about 12 partners along the way. Obviously disappointed that the format that launched in Sept. 2014 is no longer, Clements, a [one-time Lancaster JetHawks manager](#) and University of Arizona standout, said he appreciated the opportunity given to him at 980 by program director Tom Lee. Clements surprised himself by landing in the media business as a college baseball analyst for the Big West, Pac-12 Network and ESPN prior to "The Beast" side trip. "But this was never about padding a resume," said the Hawthorne High grad living in Redondo Beach. "I thought I'd love it, and I was right. I want to keep doing this. I couldn't tell you if what I did on the air was good or bad. Only the listeners know that. I know I showed up trying to have fun and be entertaining. I know I'm far from a perfect, polished broadcaster, but maybe that resonates with the listeners. I'm just myself. I know L.A. I know sports. It's my life. I believe every opinion I share and back it up. I don't say things just to get attention. I hope to get a chance to do it again if I'm fortunate enough."

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