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U.S. broadcaster gives thumbs up to mobile TV spec

ATSC standard praised for good reception, low cost

By Rick Merritt

SAN JOSE, Calif. — A large U.S. television broadcaster has announced good results from recent trials in Chicago and Denver of mobile TV using a draft standard from the Advanced Television Systems Committee (ATSC). Ion Media Networks, Inc. said it found it relatively easy to set up two mobile channels in each city and reception was better than expected.

The Open Mobile Video Coalition (OMVC), an alliance of local and national TV broadcasters, hopes to see members roll out commercial mobile TV services late next year. To date mobile TV services using other technologies have failed to deliver and grow a market among cellphone, notebook and car video users.

“We are sold on the viability of the [ATSC] service,” said Brett Jenkins, director of technology strategy and development for Ion Media. “We are very confident this technology will work, and it’s viable to put in consumer’s hands,” he added.

Ion Media’s stations WCPX and KPXC have been multicasting two standard definition mobile channels since August. LG Electronics and Harris Corp., whose technology was selected for the ATSC standard, provided prototype mobile TV receivers and transmission equipment for the tests.

“We are very encouraged by the strong and growing support for mobile DTV within the U.S. broadcast community, as exemplified by the groundbreaking trials by Ion Media,” said Woo Paik, president and chief technology officer of LG in a prepared statement.

“We’re seeing fantastic reception out to as far as 40 miles from transmitters, and beyond that we have good transmission outdoors but it’s not consistent indoors,” reported Jenkins.

Reception was also good in cars at freeway speeds and indoors within 40 miles of transmitters. “We went into parking garages where there were three or four levels of concrete above us, and reception was perfect—that was one of the big technical lessons,” said Jenkins.

Spectrum availability was not a problem in the trial. One station in the trial supports an existing high definition terrestrial broadcast, another supports multiple existing standard def channels.

“It took us just four hours to put the system up in Denver,” said Jenkins. “We plugged the boxes in at the transmitter site, and that afternoon we were driving around testing it,” he added.

Costs were in line with ATSC estimates of about $125,000 for a two-channel system. “By comparison people looking to set up new networks in the 700 MHz space will have to spend much more money,” Jenkins said.

Ion Media did not attempt to use Internet links to create a back channel for the mobile TV broadcasts, a job one broadcaster said could generate significant costs and complexities. The company also did not gather any market data as part of its tests, something other broadcasters are expected to do in early 2009.

Users may find mobile TV broadcasts compelling without support for any Web links, Jenkins said. He said some of the failed experiments in mobile TV to date have been due to lack of support for local TV channels.

“All the research shows what [mobile] consumers want is to see what’s on their TV at home,” Jenkins said.

Ion Media will continue broadcasting its mobile TV channels and is conducting more tests of indoor reception. “We are not in a position to announce [commercial] services,” said Jenkins.

The target is to have the technology and standard be ready to support service launches in 2009, said Anne Schelle, executive director of the OMVC. “This demonstration is another example that broadcasters are marching toward that goal,” she added.

The ATSC plans to formally approve its mobile TV standard on November 25. Chip and systems makers are expected to roll out before the end of 2009 a new generation of products geared for commercial offerings, replacing the prototype hardware used in current trials and shown at CES in January.

“You will see at CES devices from automotive manufacturers, but clearly 2009 is when [commercial] devices will get developed,” said Schelle.