

Multichannel NEWSWIRE

Ovation: We'll Double Distribution

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8/29/2006 5:24:00 PM

Boosted by investors such as Hubbard Media Group and indie-film impresarios Harvey and Bob Weinstein, Ovation: The Arts Network plans to relaunch and double its distribution within a year, officials said Tuesday.

During a conference call with reporters, Ovation's new management team declined to comment on how much their investors paid to buy the independent channel, which counts 5.3 million homes.

But Ovation officials did say that they plan to rebrand the network, possibly renaming it, and to reposition it to cover a broad array of arts -- traditional and more cutting-edge-- not only on the national but local and regional level. Ovation will also have an on-demand video offering.

With A&E Network and Bravo abandoning arts coverage, Ovation's new owners said they have a big opportunity to ramp up both distribution and ad sales for the network.

"You've got a wide-open category that nobody is programming to all ... You've got a void in the marketplace that they want to fill," said Ken Solomon, who described himself as Ovation's non-executive chairman.

The investor group that bought Ovation includes not only Hubbard, which also owns ReelzChannel, set to debut Sept. 27, but also The Weinstein Co., which was created and is run by the Weinstein brothers, the founders of Miramax Film Corp.; as well as Corporate Partners II, a fund of Lazard Alternative Investments; Perry Capital; and Arcadia Investment Partners.

The acquisition of Ovation will mark the Weinstein brothers' first foray into cable ownership. About a year ago, there was speculation that the Weinsteins were looking to acquire music network Fuse from Rainbow Media Holdings.

Neither the Weinsteins, nor anyone from Hubbard, participated in Tuesday's press call. And Ovation officials were sketchy about what content, if any, the Weinstein's might be able to provide for the network, apart from their role as investors.

"We're a place for great content," Solomon said. "They are great content creators."

But the Weinsteins already have some agreements in place with cable networks for their films. Last year, The Weinstein Co. closed a deal to bring new movies to Rainbow's AMC, The Independent Film Channel and WE.

Ovation is currently available in cities such as New York, Atlanta, Minneapolis/St. Paul, Chicago, Tampa/St. Petersburg, Fla., and Orlando. The network already has master

distribution agreements in place with many major cable operators, including Time Warner Cable and Comcast.

Ovation expects to double its carriage within the next year, according to Segars, and has been in ongoing talks with distributors about its plans. The channel's approach to arts programming will be different, in terms of its content, and will be offered across various platforms, according to Ovation executive VP Chad Gutstein.

"You've seen a lot of approaches historically that revolved simply around performance or exhibiting just the fine arts, and I would look at your local newspaper, quite frankly, and look at what is included in the arts or calendar section of that newspaper," Gutstein said. "At their core, the arts is local, and we want to tell the stories of the local communities, and tell the stories that are coming out of the creation of art."

Ovation will also be revving up a VOD platform that will not only include traditional arts, such as ballet, but also more contemporary fare, such as short films and animation. There will also be local and regional on-demand content from Ovation.

"Operators don't have one centralized location, and one centralized brand, that can help them market that VOD offering, and that's what Ovation represents, as a linear cable channel, to those packages," Segars said.

The new management team that will oversee Ovation's day-to-day operations include Charles Segars, a Fine Living Network veteran, as CEO; current Ovation COO Ron Garfield will remain in that post; and Gutstein, a Tennis Channel veteran.

Solomon will have the chairman title, and have an advisory role, but will remain chairman and CEO of The Tennis Channel, which is a separate entity from Ovation.

Ovation, which launched in October 1996, has a programming mix that features performance and documentary-style programming on the full range of the arts -- theater, dance, opera, jazz, classical music, literature and the visual arts.

The network's previous investors have included J.P. Morgan and The New York Times Co., but the channel wasn't given the resources that it needed "to flourish," Solomon said, as it will receive now.

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