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< EDITORIAL >

Limiting Interference Is An Industry-Wide Affair

Intelsat and SES, the world's biggest fixed satellite services operators, are acting in enlightened self interest in supporting efforts to reduce unintentional satellite-signal interference caused by improperly installed ground equipment. Their financial incentive is obvious: According to one estimate, satellite operators pay the equivalent of one person's salary per year per satellite just to deal with this specific interference issue. For Intelsat and SES, each of which operates dozens of satellites, this expense adds up quickly.

There is another cost of interference that's more difficult to measure: As the problem grows, the satellite industry's reputation for delivering reliable communications services suffers. This is bad for satellite operators everywhere, putting ammunition into the hands of terrestrial-based competitors.

In some respects, the interference problem is a symptom of the fixed satellite services industry's success in recent years. Growing demand and privatization of equipment sales and distribution, particularly in developing areas, have led to a proliferation of suppliers who in many cases are not well trained in hardware installation. An improperly installed two-way antenna, such as a Very Small Aperture Terminal (VSAT), can interfere with transponders nearby the one it is targeting, either on the same satellite or neighboring satellites. Another problem is improperly shielded ground cabling, which can pick up FM radio signals that can in turn get sent up to satellite transponders.

Satellite user advocacy organizations like the Global VSAT Forum and Satellite Users Interference Reduction Group (SUIRG) offer training courses in the proper installation of satellite equipment, but bringing these classes to places where the problem is prevalent — Africa, for example — can be costly. The same goes for having installers travel to a

central location where the courses are being offered.

At least part of the solution lies with the large satellite operators, who have enjoyed strong demand and high profit margins in recent years despite the downturn of the overall economy. Intelsat and SES are thus prepared to offer funding or in-kind services to ease the cost burden. The Global VSAT Forum, meanwhile, has agreed to lower the price of its training courses in developing countries.

But these organizations should not be expected to solve the problem by themselves. Other major satellite operators need to pitch in as well — companies like Eutelsat, Telesat Canada, Sky Perfect JSAT Corp., AsiaSat, Russian Satellite Communications Co. and Arabsat, to name a few. Eutelsat in particular has enjoyed strong profit margins in recent years and does considerable business in Africa. In addition, these satellite operators need to be more willing to share information about the type and location of interference sources, something the Global VSAT Forum and SUIRG have advocated for years.

Equipment providers also need to do their part. SUIRG has long advocated that ground equipment makers incorporate identification technology on their hardware so that sources of unintentional interference can be located and identified more quickly. This is a common-sense measure that should become standard industry practice.

Governments, meanwhile, could tighten up regulations, perhaps by requiring certification for ground equipment installers and manufacturers to the extent practical.

Though it's been said many times before, it always bears repeating that satellite interference is everybody's problem. It logically follows that everybody in the industry has a responsibility to be part of the solution.