

STAR SKIRMISHES:

Skyvision and Satellite Receivers Ltd. Partner to Debut New Satellite TV System

By Ken Reitz

It's not exactly Star Wars®, but it is the most interesting development in the satellite TV industry since DISH Network® and DirecTV® started out over ten years ago. Skyvision, the long-time home satellite TV catalog company from Fergus Falls, Minnesota, has teamed up with Satellite Receivers Ltd. (SRL), an independent satellite TV programming provider from Green Bay, Wisconsin, to start their own off-the-shelf satellite TV company.

According to SRL general manager George Bell, the two companies decided to combine their independent services to fill a need for customers who just want a simple, low cost alternative to the current offerings from cable-TV and the two primary small dish program providers.

To make this possible SRL buys programming from a primary cable-TV program distributor called Headend-In-The-Sky (known by its acronym HITS) and re-sells the programming to its own customers. HITS uses the Ku-band side of broadcast satellite Galaxy 16 (99° W also known by the designator X4) to deliver digital cable-TV programming to the cable-TV industry. This service offers the standard cable-TV fare including staple movie channels such as Showtime/The Movie Channel and other popular channels such as TV Land, HGTV, the Disney Channel and dozens more.

Del Jose, president of Skyvision, said they found a supplier for refurbished Motorola 410 satellite receivers which are used to receive the DigicipherII digital cable programming on G16. They've combined the receiver with a sturdy 85 cm (about 33 inches) off-set fed Ku-band dish made by Samsonic of Taiwan and a .5 dB Ku-band LNBF. Price for the complete 410 receiver equipment package is \$229.95. For those who already have a dish of that size or use a big 10' motor driven dish, the 410 receiver can be purchased alone for \$129.95.

SRL has entered into an agreement with Motorola's Access Control Center to customize an on-screen guide for the new service which is sent on



G16's HITS data stream (channel 204 the *Game Show Network*) which includes the receiver's address and authorization information. Without authorization the 410 receiver is basically non-functional. Authorizing the receiver is merely a matter of calling the 800 number which is provided with installation instructions. Once authorized, the receiver can download the guide and any programming package offered by SRL for which the user decides to subscribe.

So, What's On?

There are essentially two service tiers offered by SRL. The 410 Basic Pak is \$19.99/month and includes most of the basic cable channels with which viewers are already familiar. You'll also get 38 DMX music channels which span a wide variety of music formats without commercials or announcers. Information about the song currently playing on any DMX channel is displayed on the user's TV screen. The audio on these services surpasses those offered on either of the other two small dish systems and, for serious music lovers, could be worth the basic price alone. The second tier service, called the 410 Deluxe Pak, costs \$29.99/month and includes all of the Basic Pak (including the DMX channels) plus an additional 30 video channels.

SRL also offers several movie channel packages. Their Showtime/Movie Channel package is an additional \$17.50/month and includes 14 channels of Showtime and Movie Channel East and West coast feeds as well as FLIX East and Sundance West. Or, customers can choose the Starz Super Pak for the same price which includes 19 channels in the Starz family East and West coast feeds. The monthly price tag for these services decreases as customers expand

their subscription. For example, the Showtime/Movie Channel package goes down to \$15.50/month when a one year subscription is purchased. SRL is currently working on a carriage agreement with HBO/Cinemax.

The Down Side

According to George Bell at SRL, this service is not really intended to compete with DISH Network and DirecTV. At present they have no contract with the suite of ESPN channels except for ESPN Classic. Nor do they have any agreements with any of the regional sports networks. They do, however, offer peripheral sports channels such as Speed, the Golf Channel, and Outdoor Life Network. There is also no Pay-Per-View provision at this time, though Bell indicated that they may be able to offer certain limited events or specialty channels in the future if it looks as though there's enough demand. And, finally, there are no HD channels available with this service. While this system could technically accommodate DigicipherII HD programming with the addition of a Motorola HDD-200 decoder there is no indication that that will happen.

And, the Up Side

The 410 receiver has a traditional channel 3 or 4 modulator through an "F" connector output but it also has RCA cables to carry separate video and left/right audio channels. It has "S" video output which can be used in conjunction with a digital audio output via a single RCA cable to your surround-sound stereo receiver/amplifier. This makes the audio from all of the channels, particularly the DMX music channels, sound even better.

The 410 receiver is a versatile receiver but has no dish drive option so it can't be used to drive a big dish. However, it can be "slaved" to any analog receiver that does have a dish drive so that you can drive a big dish (provided it has a Ku-band LNB) to G16 and tune in these channels and use the analog receiver to pick up the wild feeds still being sent via C and Ku-band transponders.

Skyvision offers a two dish patio mount which lets you mount this dish and another 85 cm dish which can feed a separate MPEGII Free-to-Air receiver pointed at another Ku-band satellite such as Galaxy 25, for example, where a great number of in-the-clear international channels including MHz

Networks (a Washington, D.C. based alternative to PBS) are located. If you take the output of the MPEGII receiver and the 410 and put them into a DVD recorder, for instance, you can switch from one satellite source to the other and double your satellite TV reception capabilities.

The on-screen guide on the 410 receiver is excellent. It can be customized to display only the channels you watch regularly. You can set up daily, weekly or monthly recording schedules. Feeding the output of the receiver into a DVD recorder lets you time shift programs or watch off-air TV or MPEGII channels while recording off the 410 receiver or any combination of the three. If you have a TV that allows picture-in-picture you can watch two different satellite feeds or a satellite feed and local TV at the same time.

Local Network HD Reception

Many people are buying the new flat screen 16:9 aspect ratio HDTV sets for reception of local channels in HD. These sets have a large number of inputs and you can take advantage of this by feeding the output of the 410 receiver to the new HDTV set any number of ways. Even in rural locations, with the addition of a large, rotatable UHF-TV antenna with a mast-mounted pre-amplifier and with the touch of a remote button switch the input to bring in the satellite delivered channels via the 410 receiver.

Many older wide-screen sets don't have digital tuners built-in. If you have such a set you can add an outboard HDTV tuner. There are many stand-alone HDTV tuners found at most electronics retailers at a wide variety of prices. By adding a stand-alone, off-air tuner you can watch the secondary channels most digital TV stations are broadcasting along with their usual network fare. You can even do this on old analog TV sets. Here's how: Attach an outdoor antenna to the antenna jack on the tuner. Take the RCA video and left/right stereo outputs and put them into your VCR or DVD recorder. The output of this is then sent to your old-fashioned analog TV set. By using the remote control on the digital tuner you can set up the output of the tuner to accommodate a standard 4:5 aspect ratio analog TV screen. You'll get black bars at the top and bottom or the sides as it re-sizes the picture but you'll watch a crystal clear picture and have access to all of the extra digital channels.

For more information about the Skyvision 410 system call 800-500-9275.

INSTALLING THE SKYVISION/SRL LOW COST SATELLITE TV SYSTEM

This new system can be installed on most lawns, roofs, walls, yards and balconies whether you own or rent. The dish size meets the FCC regulations allowing installation anywhere anyone wants to put the system as long as it's in a space completely controlled by the homeowner or renter. [Check out the FCC Fact Sheet [here: http://www.fcc.gov/mb/facts/otard.html](http://www.fcc.gov/mb/facts/otard.html)]

If you want to save money you can do the installation yourself but, if you're not comfortable with the task, many local satellite dealers will do the job for a fee. The dish package includes a wall mount and sturdy bracket but the dish may also be installed in your yard using a 1.5" galvanized steel pole 4 feet long which can be found in the plumbing section of most building supply stores.

The Samsonic dish is very easy to assemble. There are few parts and the diagram that comes with the dish is excellent. Once assembled, take it to the dish site and pound the pipe into the ground using a block of wood on top of the pipe to absorb the hammer blows avoid misshaping the top which will make it difficult for the mount to slide over it. In most cases 18" of pipe in the ground is all you need to make it secure. Use a carpenter's level to make sure it's plumb. Check for plumb on all sides of the pole.

After you mount the dish on the pole set the dish elevation by aligning the elevation indicator so that it corresponds to your location's latitude. If your location

is at latitude 45 degrees, for instance, set the guide edge to 45 degrees and tighten the bolts. Now you're ready to align the dish to G16. The best way to do this is to take a long extension cord out to the dish site and plug in the 410 receiver and a small TV set. Take a short length of coax cable and connect the LNBF to the back of the 410 receiver where it indicates the LNBF should go. Connect the 410 receiver to the TV. Now, turn on the TV and the 410. Tune the TV to channel 3 or 4 depending on which modulator output you've set the 410. You should be seeing a screen indicating the 410 is on. Press "options" on the remote and then "change system settings." Next press "change installation settings" and then press "tune in satellite signal." Turn the volume up on the TV and you'll hear a low tone. Once you lock into the digital signal on G16 the tone changes pitch, rising as you increase the signal strength. You'll also see the display which indicates the signal strength number and a bar graph which turns from red to green when the signal is locked on and increases in size as you increase signal strength.

Now, pivoting the dish very slowly east or west and you'll hear the tone change and see the graph change if you encounter the signal. Move the dish ever so slowly up/down and side-to-side on the mounting pole until you get the strongest signal. Lock down all the bolts and you're done. I had to rotate the LNBF in its holder about 20 degrees off perpendicular so that it would change polarity when

switching transponders. To finish the installation run a length of RG6 coax from the dish into the house and to the location of the receiver. Try to keep the run of RG6 to less than 100 feet in length.

Reading about how to do this is one thing but if it's your first satellite dish installation prepare to spend a couple of hours searching for the signal. The beam width on this dish is extremely tight and you can sail right past it without any indication on the signal meter. It wasn't until I had adjusted the LNBF that I got the first signal indication from the receiver. Keep in mind that the mount should be loose enough to rotate the dish east and west but that if it's too loose you'll be missing the satellite by a wide margin. If the mount is too tight you'll risk rotating the mounting pole instead. That will make it easy for a gust of wind to rotate the dish and take it completely off the satellite once you've finished the installation.

I put this dish on a pole I had originally used for a DirecTV installation which I had stopped using. The pole and run of RG6 were already in place. All I had to do was assemble the dish, place it on the pole and align it with G16. The 410 receiver, dish and LNBF are all of excellent quality and relatively inexpensive. Skyvision maintains a tech support number for purchasers and SRL has a customer support number for their subscribers.