

Dual paths mean a racing certainty



Mark Shadbolt: "We have built a cabin on the platform section. This has allowed us more roof real estate on which we can locate our two antennas for the duplicate paths"

Coverage of Formula One is big business for broadcasters, so ensuring signals get successfully back to base is an essential part of the process. SISLink in the UK has recently won a contract from ITV to provide satellite services. **Philip Stevens** investigates

In February, SISLink announced that it had been awarded a four-year contract to provide ITV Sport in the UK with satellite facilities for its coverage of Formula One motor race meetings. The deal, which started with the Australian Grand Prix in Melbourne, means the service provider will be responsible for supplying uplink facilities at most of the F1 worldwide locations.

"There will be two ways in which we will be providing this service," explains Mark Shadbolt, sales and marketing director at SISLink. "For those locations that are within the UK and mainland Europe, we will be sending our own truck. For F1 venues that are further afield, we will be using flyaway units or vehicles available locally. In all cases, however, the same level of service will be provided and our engineers will oversee the operation."

North One Television handles ITV Formula One coverage — and the signals from its local production unit are sent via a normal SDI feed to the uplink facility. From there, two separate paths are provided to the United Kingdom where the signals are received at the SISLink Master Control Room in London.

Specially built truck

Rather than rely on a normal panel van for the uplink facility, the SISLink F1 vehicle is based on a Mercedes Atego flat bed truck. "Basically, we have built a cabin on the platform section," reveals Shadbolt. "This has allowed us more roof real estate on which we can locate our two antennas for the duplicate paths."

These twin antennas are needed to provide the diversity that is considered vital for such a major event. Not only has ITV invested huge amounts of money into its F1 production, but also advertisers pay a great deal for slots in the race coverage, and a loss of programme would present a serious problem for the broadcaster.

"We have placed great emphasis on diversity because there are a number of difficulties that could

confront us and we want to cover every eventuality. Indeed, every part of the truck will be fully redundant," states Shadbolt.

Alongside the dual antennas, the truck is provided with duplicate mains electricity facilities and an onboard generator. In the event of a mains failure, the uplink facility could stay on air for at least 30 minutes.

Good economies

Of course, sending two vehicles to each venue could provide all of these duplicate facilities, but having the slightly larger flat bed truck that is necessary to accommodate twin antennas does offer a number of other advantages. Not only does it mean one driver and one fuel bill, but it also demands only one parking space — a major consideration where such facilities at race venues are at a premium.

Also included within the contract is two-way broadband IP over satellite. Again, there is a back up provided for this facility. "The many journalists who travel to each race need the same kind of connectivity that they would get in the office. So this connection allows them to browse the internet, file reports and generally operate in the same way as they would back home," explains Shadbolt.

"We have placed great emphasis on diversity because there are a number of difficulties that could confront us and we want to cover every eventuality" – Mark Shadbolt, SISLink

In addition, ITV may provide a corporate lounge at each venue and the satellite connectivity allows guests access to the web. Under normal circumstances, SISLink's own satellite capacity is sufficient for this purpose, but if necessary it can be augmented through an iDirect platform. Two-way communications are provided via Paradise modems with a data rate of 128kB. In addition, there is a multiplex facility that supplies two 4-wires, 2 ISDN lines and IP connectivity.

In addition, the uplink truck can transmit DVB-S2, MPEG-4 and Windows Media.

The correct use of space

"We have maximised the use of space within the vehicle's cabin," reveals Shadbolt. "There is little or no need for editing facilities for race coverage, so we have devoted more to providing the highest levels of video and audio monitoring."

Although Formula One race coverage is presently offered in SD, the SISLink facility does allow an upgrade to high definition when a change is made. In fact, when the truck is not used for Formula One, it will be available for other programmes.

But beyond that, the successful format of the truck used for ITV Sport is to be adopted elsewhere. SISLink will be using the same Atego type vehicles with similar specification, but increased baseband for two HD dual antenna uplinks, for other high profile SD and HD work.

Jon Pearce, the technical producer of ITV Sport says, "ITV Sport is delighted to be working with SISLink who have demonstrated their commitment to ITV by designing and building the new truck. The truck offers us increased resilience and flexibility while also providing HD capabilities. This is an ideal solution in a fast changing environment."

With all F1 races taking place on Sundays, the schedule for deploying the uplink is similar — no matter the location. "For most F1 venues, we arrive on a Thursday lunchtime and have everything in place to transmit signals by that evening," says Shadbolt. "That means we can transmit practice on Friday and Saturday, with the actual race taking place on Sunday. We are then clear of the venue by Sunday evening. This uplink facility is designed for ease of use and to fall in with the broadcaster's schedule."

www.sislink.tv