

The Commercial Advisor

ROB RITTER • COMMERCIAL ADVISORY COMMITTEE

800 MHz and You

So, after almost three years of regulatory maneuvers, the FCC has issued its Report and Order with respect to restructuring the 800 MHz band to eliminate harmful interference. The order will bring wholesale retuning of the band, with thousands of affected licensees nationwide.

With \$21.5 billion set aside to pay for retuning costs, the FCC order certainly creates business opportunities for members of the public safety commercial community, and some in the trade press have hailed this as a bonanza for vendors.

Contrary to what some may have you believe, money will not rain down from the sky. Instead, successful vendors will profit as they always have: by being knowledgeable, cooperative and beneficial partners with their public safety customers. Our job in the commercial community is to help our clients safely navigate the rebanding rapids and arrive down river, intact and safe.

Regardless of your role in the process, your customers will look to you for knowledge and guidance. These are the five steps you can take to be successful:

- **Educate yourself:** Vendors must understand the new rules and the mechanics of the process. Take advantage of the resources available to you, including the upcoming IWCE Road Show presentations, APCO's 800 ALERT webinars and APCO chapters conferences. You must understand how and when rebanding will affect your current and potential customers.
- **Educate your customers:** Your customers probably have a thousand items to fill their to-do lists before adding "reprogram entire radio system," so they will look to you for help. Vendors can cement their clients' trust and loyalty by providing timely, concise, accurate information about the process. Anticipate their big questions and answer them: How can I limit disruptions to public safety operations? When do I have to move? What modifications does my equipment need? How will I get reimbursed?
- **Prepare now:** Encourage your customers to start the process immediately by conducting an equipment inventory, projecting and allocating internal man-hours and planning logistics with end-users and affected agencies. Vendors, you

should have your own strategic plans, making sure you have adequate manpower, tools, cash flow and flexibility to handle any work you expect to take on.

- **Build alliances:** A successful system retune requires many complimentary elements: engineers and technical managers to assess the system and create project specifications; attorneys to draft, review and negotiate contracts; FCC experts to prepare, file and track licensing applications; radio technicians to complete the physical retune; and project managers to ensure everything runs smoothly and all eligible costs are reimbursed at the project's completion. All these professionals must function smoothly as a team or the project will sputter and stall.

You don't need any fancy alliance agreements, but you should find potential project partners you can trust to handle the job. When you recommend third parties to your clients, you put your own reputation on the line. If you don't have successful long-term relationships, turn to your current customers, the APCO Buyers' Guide, Commercial Advisory Committee members and your local Chapter Commercial Advisory Member (CCAM) as helpful resources to find other firms, but make sure you check some client references before recommending someone who is new to you.

- **Keep your word:** This should be obvious, but do the best job possible. Rebanding will be a long, regionally organized three-year process. If your company is not up to the task or does not honor its commitments, your prospect funnel will run dry quickly. A strong reference from a respected APCO member is the best form of marketing in this business, but bad word of mouth can make black ink run red in a hurry. The three most important words in public safety sales are "reputation, reputation, reputation."

If you do your homework, provide value to your customer and keep your word, both of you will make it through those dangerous whitewater rapids without getting all wet. ■

About the Author

Bob Ritter, a member of the APCO Commercial Advisory Committee, is a telecommunications attorney with the law firm of Shulman, Rogers, Gandall, Pordy & Ecker in Rockville, Md. The firm represents many private radio clients and has negotiated more than 100 retuning agreements with Nextel.