



# This Is A Great Idea To Steal!

By Bryan Rader ■ *MediaWorks*

When I was in college, one of my first experiences with cable TV came from one of my roommates. He had pirated cable TV service from the sorority house across the street, and ran an aerial cable line to our fraternity's rooftop. He then ran the wire through a window, and split the cable signal several times so that it fed about ten different TV sets throughout the frat house. He never charged anybody for his entrepreneurial work, but he was very proud of his effort.

I was always embarrassed about it too...especially since I ended up in the cable business.

This is a serious problem that affects all cable operators—both private and franchise. According to the NCTA in 2000, over \$6.5 billion a year was lost

ate an environment where there is a real potential for theft. Especially among poorly managed systems.

Cabletheft.com defines cable theft in three ways: active theft (when someone intentionally makes an illegal physical connection), premium theft (using equipment to authorize the receipt of premium programming) and passive theft (having active cable in your residence without notifying the cable operator).

Some cable operators have used amnesty programs to convert "thieves" to "subscribers". Last fall ComCast ran a two-week amnesty program in one of its top markets and over 5,000 customers came forward to turn in illegal equipment and, became honest-paying subscribers. What a huge number!

tions a year of every box on every system to see if there has been any signs of tampering, breaking in, or lack of security. And we are very aggressive with legal notices if we spot an offender.

Lastly, we are very selective and careful with all new technicians we hire, and we audit behind our new employees, frequently during their orientation process with the company.

We have learned that if you leave it untouched or unmanaged, you will experience a small problem that grows into a big one. Oftentimes, you can follow the trail back to one person who is offering \$50 hook-ups to every resident at the swimming pool because he owns the magic key to the box. But, his little circus ring won't last for long.

Many people do not consider it stealing either. To some people it feels like a great way to get back at the cable company for all those years of lousy service, but stealing is stealing. And you can't let them steal your business away.

Cable theft doesn't need to be a problem. If you make it a priority, and create a solid monitoring and inspecting program, you will not experience any significant issues. It's smart for PCO's to recognize that theft of service exists, and we're in a position to stop it. So, be sure to "steal their thunder" before they steal yours. ■

***"According to the NCTA in 2000, over \$6.5 billion a year was lost due to cable theft."***

due to cable theft. This is about 17% of the industry's estimated gross revenues.

A website called Cabletheft.com conducts a survey regarding theft and estimates that almost one-half of its respondents say that either they or someone they know is stealing cable. This website believes that 11.48% of Basic subs are illegal, and 9.23% of premium subs are stealing cable.

This is a very serious matter. State and Federal laws give operators the weapons to prosecute, fine, and put in prison people who are caught stealing cable.

And it can be very damaging to your business. Did you know that the MDU market is one of the most likely areas for theft? High turnover, poor security and numerous unlocked utility boxes all cre-

You have to be particularly careful in the MDU business. A cable technician who does not complete all of his disconnects can create a large number of "passive theft" units. There is nothing worse than hearing a customer say "the service was already on when I moved in here." What a loss.

At my company, we take cable theft very seriously. We know that without a strong monitoring program, we can experience a 5% drop-off in sub count on a site in a matter of months. This is particularly true on B and C properties.

Our program consists of twice-a-year audits on 100% of our cable passings. We now have incentives for our techs and managers who achieve high levels of accuracy. We also conduct four inspec-

## About the Author

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