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Cablevision lets tamperers say "Excuse me"

By John Koopman

"Excuse me."

No, not Steve Martin, but Lincoln Cablevision. During March, Lincoln Cablevision will give people with illegal hook-ups a chance to excuse themselves



Shelley Sperry/Daily Nebraskan

with no questions asked, no prosecution and no \$150 tampering fine.

Dick Bates, general manager for Lincoln Cablevision, said the idea for the "Excuse Me" month came from the National Business Crime Information Network. The concept, he said, has been used successfully in other parts of the country.

Bates said about 35 tampered converters had been turned in during the first two days of March. He said he expected many more throughout the month, especially after March 15, when the second cycle of bills will be sent to users. Each bill carries a notice explaining "Excuse Me" month.

By conservative estimates, Lincoln Cablevision lost about \$500,000 last year through the theft of services, with things like converter tampering, Bates said. Cable companies in the nation lost about \$700 million, he said.

Bates said the theft of cable services has increased significantly with the use of cable converters.

"In the past, we could just look and see who was hooked up," Bates said. "It was easy to detect and to prosecute."

Since Cablevision began using converters for expanded channels, he said, service theft has become much more difficult to detect. Bates said there are three ways converter tampering is discovered: a technician finds one on a service call, a user brings the converter in hoping that Cablevision will overlook any irregularities and concerned citizens volunteer information.

Bates said the last is the most effective way of detecting and deterring tampering. He said subscribers have access to a toll-free number which connects them with the National Business Crime Information Network. They can give information concerning tampering and are guaranteed complete anonymity. The system is similar to that of Crime Stoppers, he said.

Most of the informers are subscribers offended by having to pay for cable services while others don't, Bates said.

Bates said Lincoln Cablevision prefers not to prosecute tamperers. That's why the company uses the "Excuse Me" project, he said.

"We'd prefer to change them into paying customers," he said. "Maybe someone who never thought of tampering as a crime would come in and take advantage of it."

Bates said Cablevision is more concerned with prosecuting people who tamper with converters continually. He said some people alter converters "as a profession." Some people import previously altered converters into the city and some charge fees to alter peoples' converters, he said. Of about 26,000 converters in Lincoln, 25 to 30 percent are operating illegally, he said.

Lincoln Cablevision, as well as nearly as every other cable company, is trying to find techniques to combat tampering. Bates said the ultimate system is an "addressed system," which is activated from a central office. However, that

technology is still being developed, he said, so companies are finding other solutions.

Currently, the best prevention tool is to make the converter box as impregnable as possible, Bates said. As any tamperer knows, the key to altering a converter lies with the microchips inside the converter. To combat this, Cablevision's boxes have special screws which require special tools to loosen. This has been helpful, but is not completely adequate, he said.

Terry Santos, Cablevision's security administrator, found a converter which was crudely cut apart by tamperers attempting to gain access to the circuitry.

In the past, Bates said, converters that people brought to the office were checked only if there were obvious signs of tampering. Now, he said, every converter will be checked against the subscriber's file to see if any tampering has been done.

Also, Bates said, Lincoln Cablevision will be more aggressive in civil and criminal prosecution for tampering. He said current and future state legislation will toughen laws concerning theft of cable services.

Attorneys for Lincoln Cablevision have been in contact with the county and city attorneys and have discussed prosecution of perpetrators, Bates said. Since theft of cable services is not considered a serious crime, he said, Cablevision will do most of the investigating prior to taking a case to court.

Night towing, NSSA receive attention of ASUN candidates

(Editor's Note: This is the third in a four-part series on the issues in the 1984 presidential campaign)

Question Three: What is your position on the Nebraska State Student Association and night towing? Are these problems?

Aim (Responding: Presidential candidate Mark Scudder and first vice presidential candidate Curt Oltmans)

NSSA — "We see it as a three-year-old group that had some momentum going. We'd like to see them testify or lobby on some specific issues that relate directly to UNL, and other state colleges if the need comes up.

"We don't want people to think we're trying to get rid of NSSA. We just think that any organization should not be afraid to undergo scrutiny and take suggestions for changes."

Night towing — "Yes, we feel it's a problem if it



inconveniences people. We're not in favor of abolishing night towing though, because it serves as a deterrent. We shouldn't chuck it until a viable alternative is found."

Fashin (Responding: Presidential candidate Tim Burke and first vice presidential candidate Mike Cassling)

NSSA — "We really like what they're doing, the way they're lobbying. We think UNL should have a little more input because we are mostly what NSSA should be representing. We think just by the ASUN president getting on a one-on-one basis with (NSSA Executive Director) Deb Chapelle, we could work

something out. If financially possible, we'd like to have NSSA get a larger staff."

Night towing — "The solution is simple. I don't think towing at night is a good idea at all, due to the fact that assaults do happen, and it's a terrible inconvenience.

"The university should just withhold grades, withhold any kind of grant or any kind of loan."

United Students (Responding: Presidential candidate Kevin Goldstein and first vice-presidential candidate Julie Meusberger)

NSSA — "Every student on campus votes on it every election. It's not our choice to say. One thing is, NSSA needs to have a more itemized budget, and hopefully that won't be confused with an audit. We're not in any way saying that money is being misused. We're saying that there needs to be increased accountability. Overall, NSSA does a good job representing students, for a 3-year-old organization."

Night towing — "It's a potential danger situation. We're not trying to relieve students of their responsibility for paying tickets — we're just saying there are better ways to take care of the situation."

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Goal is to help adults

"Back to School" workshop tonight

Adults considering enrolling or returning to UNL can attend a free "Back to School" workshop today at the Nebraska Center for Continuing Education, 33rd and Holdrege streets.

The workshop will be from 6:30 p.m. to 9 p.m. and will offer information on financial aid, general admission, registration, evening classes and independent study courses offered by correspondence and television, said Ruth Harper, college adult counselor in the UNL Division of Continuing Studies.

"It saves a lot of effort," Harper said. Chuck Havlicek, coordinator for evening programs and adult learning services, said the workshop is a "one-stop shopping center" for adult undergraduates and graduate students.

"It is a unique and valuable service," Havlicek said. "It is one of the few times when a student can find all these resources in one room."

Because it is free, no pre-registration is necessary,

Havlicek said. The sponsors are the Office of Student Affairs and the UNL Division of Continuing Studies.

Harper said that although no figures are available on increases or decreases in adult enrollment at UNL, the number of adult students is "steadily increasing."

Sometimes, she said, finding time to enroll is the least of the problems facing adults. Many have a lack of self-confidence which, Harper said, is the main obstacle.

But this problem usually is solved easily, she said. "They're well-motivated students," she said. "Once they're back in school, they do very well."

To help adults adjust to campus life, the Non-Traditional Student Association offers information and support, Harper said. Non-credit courses designed to help students brush up on study skills also are available at low costs, she said.

"We give as much support as we can," Harper said.