



How Cable Companies Choose Channels

With a few exceptions, cable television service providers can offer whatever channels they choose. Cable companies negotiate agreements with television networks regarding what channels will be carried and on what programming tiers they will be available. Consumers should be aware of this when they consider pay TV subscription options. The questions and answers below provide more detailed information.

Are cable companies required to include certain channels in their lineups?

Cable companies are generally required to offer a "basic tier" of programming to all subscribers before they purchase additional programming. This basic tier includes, at a minimum, the local broadcast television stations and public access channels that the operator may be required to offer through an agreement with the local government. Cable companies may choose to add more channels to the basic tier, but are not required to do so.

Why did my cable system drop a local television station?

Rather than be carried automatically on the basic tier, local broadcast stations sometimes choose to enter a "retransmission consent" agreement with cable systems. When the broadcast stations and cable systems fail to reach an agreement, the local station may be dropped until an agreement is reached. (For more information, see www.fcc.gov/consumers/guides/receiving-broadcast-tv-stations-dropped-pay-tv-service.) If a local broadcast station is removed, you may be able to watch the station using an over-the-air antenna or by subscribing to a cable or satellite service. Some stations may provide programming on the internet, though its availability may be delayed.

Can a cable company change its channel lineup after I subscribe?

Yes. But in most cases, cable service providers must give customers notice of the lineup change 30 days before it takes effect, unless the change is due to circumstances beyond the cable company's control.

Are cable systems required to offer "a la carte" and pay-per-view channels?

No, but they may choose to do so. FCC rules prohibit requiring customers to subscribe to any tiers beyond the basic tier in order to have access to a la carte channels or pay-per-view channels offered by the system.

Filing a complaint

You have multiple options for filing a complaint with the FCC:

- File a complaint online at <https://consumercomplaints.fcc.gov>
- By phone: 1-888-CALL-FCC (1-888-225-5322); TTY: 1-888-TELL-FCC (1-888-835-5322); ASL: 1-844-432-2275
- By mail (please include your name, address, contact information and as much detail about your complaint as possible):



Federal Communications Commission
Consumer and Governmental Affairs Bureau
Consumer Inquiries and Complaints Division
45 L Street NE
Washington, DC 20554

Alternate formats

To request this article in an alternate format - braille, large print, Word or text document or audio - write or call us at the address or phone number at the bottom of the page, or send an email to fcc504@fcc.gov.

Last Reviewed: 12/10/19

