



September/October 2014
Volume 34 No. 6



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Programming Is King, But Brand Is Queen

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It's pretty simple: viewers watch programs they like. So does this mean that making a TV network successful is all about picking the right programs? Maybe years ago, when audiences had few choices about what and when they should watch. Now, all of this has changed. Multiple screens, on-demand offerings and piracy have loosened the bonds between the programs and the networks.

The difference between the broadcast and the cable world is gone. The multi-screen era demands TV networks create identity and brand beyond popular programs. A TV brand that is defined only by the programming it carries is in a very weak position (unless the contents are exclusively secured for a long period of time). If network executives aren't able to define the personality of the TV network, loyalty of the viewers is for the shows and not for the network. It also means viewers are ready to migrate elsewhere to follow shows when they are screened elsewhere. Networks should think of themselves as brands, not as mere distribution vehicles.



It was 1986 when Maurice and Charles Saatchi, founders of one of the finest advertising agencies in the world, Saatchi & Saatchi, introduced a new concept. They noticed that there is not a significant difference among the products a consumer can buy. With today's high quality merchandise, consumers have no doubt that any product will do the job it is designed for. For example, if you go to a store to buy a TV set, you'll end up lost in front of all those dream boxes watching you. Yes, they have different features, some extra plugs and come in different colors.

But you can pretty much be sure they are all great TV sets. So the difference for you in the end is the price and the brand. The Saatchis understood that in such a high-quality environment, the positioning and the brand make the difference — so a Sony TV set is different from a Sharp set, which is different from a Samsung set.

In the same way, the relevance of your favorite network has to do with the quality of its content and the distinctiveness and appeal of its brand.

So unless the networks have full control of the content they are screening, spending big money to secure a great show, and then spending extra money to promote that show sometimes only benefits the distributor. The distributor is selling the same show to other windows, and when the rights are up the distributor is ready to sell the same show (actually a stronger and more well promoted show now), to the competition.

Yes, content is king, but networks should never forget it is a mercenary king that goes where the money is. As a result, the network risks being only one of the many places where the viewer can find the show said network has launched and promoted.

Branding and marketing functions are often treated with smaller additional budgets that work within the lines defined by distributors and programmers. This is shortsighted. It's treating networks the way they were treated 10 years ago.

Nowadays, marketing and programming should be part of the same effort. Networks should not buy a program they cannot market or a program that does not fit their brand completely. There must be a good reason to watch that show on a network. Otherwise any other option will be just as good (and probably cheaper).

The good old days when showing the billboard (or the promo) of the program with a small call to action for when and where the show is screened was enough are gone forever.

The new challenge is linking the content inside the network's brand, so that both are enriched by the combination. The promos, the ads, the social activity are no longer just to inform viewers about the show's "coordinates." They must constantly remind viewers why that show is brought to them by a specific network and why watching it there is different and possibly better than watching it elsewhere.

This also means that the producers of the shows must be flexible about integrating their promotion into the network's guidelines. Because the only way viewers will come back to their favorite channels is when channels are relevant to them, connected to them and are good navigators in the galaxy of available program choices for them. In summary: Long live the king, but God bless the queen!

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