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## Upfronts Showcase Evolution

### Networks Put Focus on Meeting Consumers in New Ways, Platforms

By Mark Dominiak, Special to TelevisionWeek

Story continues below...



For many years, any expectations media planners had heading into the network prime-time upfront presentations swirled around what new shows would be unveiled, which stars would make appearances and how good the shrimp would be.

But for the past few years, things have been very different. With the vast changes in the marketplace, planners' expectations have shifted to curiosity about how the networks will embrace change and how they will evolve their offerings to meet new challenges. There was evidence in this year's presentations that the networks are moving in a positive direction.

#### General Observations

Two consistent things among the networks this time out were announcements about video player launches for the coming season and remarkably short presentations. It was easier to maintain attention and energy levels in the shorter presentation window,

which allowed for better focus on what networks had to say.

Plenty of interesting factoids were tossed out throughout the presentations. ABC claimed it had the most engaged viewers, as reported by IAG. CBS Chairman Leslie Moonves noted 75 percent of DVR playback is of network programming, while CBS Interactive President Quincy Smith noted the 89.1 percent unduplicated Web reach of CBS digital properties. At the Fox presentation, a recent ANA study was cited that claimed 80 percent of brand sales are based on long-term brand equity (the implication being TV generates that equity).

The overall focus of the presentations was largely where it belonged: on how the networks will attempt to meet consumers in new ways via new platforms, and on high hopes for their new content offerings.

## ABC

Amid the humor of the "Ugly Betty" musical number and "America's Bingo Channel" references, ABC recapped three goals: to engage viewers, to schedule effectively and to attract upscale audiences. ABC stressed that success would not be about more platforms, but about being in the right place at the right time.

The importance of commercial ratings was woven into ABC's presentation. The network cited initiatives like requiring Cox to disable the fast-forward feature on set-top boxes to prevent ad-skipping, in exchange for providing hit series to Comcast's VOD service. It also demonstrated a desire to make it easier for consumers to find content across platforms via its Start Here navigation tool.

Of ABC's new content offerings, planners should take note of "Sam I Am" and "Oprah's Big Give." With a strong lead-in and compatible audience in "Dancing With the Stars," "Sam" has a good shot at success.

Oprah's many stand-alone properties have been embraced by viewers, and her "Big Give" should generate excitement. It's a shame it won't appear until midseason.

It will be interesting to see whether ABC's re-engineered Wednesday night can thrive. "Private Practice" has a quality cast and the potential to bring loyal "Grey's Anatomy" viewers to Wednesdays. "Pushing Daisies" and "Dirty Sexy Money" appear to be good complements to "Private Practice."

## CBS

In Chicago, where I watched the upfronts, the introduction to the New York presentation cited work by Professor Henry Jenkins, director of MIT's Comparative Media Studies program. He has suggested technology is creating isolation and destroying social interaction, with iPods and BlackBerries leading to fewer shared experiences. The stage-setting implication is that network TV content is one thriving catalyst that can still trigger social interaction and conversation.

CBS Entertainment President Nina Tassler declared that CBS made a commitment to be daring in its development, and the offerings she presented largely delivered on that claim.

"Kid Nation" delivers a new twist in reality programming and will be one show I encourage my kids to watch. "Viva Laughlin" is not "Cop Rock," instead coming off like a legitimate Broadway type of offering.

"The Big Bang Theory" is not as unusual as those shows, but it is in a perfect time slot to be successful. "Cane" isn't a new concept, but the cast is blue-chip and it should do well Tuesday. "Moonlight" is reminiscent of "Beauty and the Beast," and it's sandwiched between two veteran shows with unique premises.

Summer offering "Swingtown," a highly adult drama that's sure to generate buzz, certainly has the feel of a show that's pushing the envelope, but in a calculated way.

Couple the crop of daring new offerings with a strong cross-platform distribution system for content and planners will have interesting contact points to leverage with CBS.

## The CW

The CW stated three goals for the season-to strengthen the schedule, to enable growth and to define the network's brand. Much in its presentations suggests it may succeed. It unveiled promising young-adult programming along with ad units and platforms that break new ground.

"Gossip Girl" looks able to fill the void created by "Gilmore Girls"' exit. "Aliens in America" is a perfect companion to "Everybody Hates Chris." "CW Now" already has garnered significant attention, and it would be surprising if its partner Sunday show "Online Nation" didn't as well. "Life Is Wild" looks to be a well-done show that's great for family-friendly Sunday and should help deliver on defining The CW's brand. "Reaper" is a good partner for "Beauty and the Geek."

To go with its content wraps, "cwickies" were offered as a way to give one advertiser cumulative exposure across a night. These 5-second units offer creative groups a unique platform to tell brand stories. The brand integration concept in "CW Now" appears to be sold already. It will be interesting to see if the notion can migrate to other CW programs.

In digital space, there are plenty of opportunities for planners. "One Tree Hill" will fill in its on-screen stories via Web diaries, while the "Gossip Girl" example offers a range of possibilities for avatars, music lists, etc.

## Fox

No matter how you slice it, Fox has an impressive roster of pop culture engines, from "American Idol" to NASCAR to "House" to the Super Bowl to "24" to "The Simpsons." For planners who service brands that thrive on pop culture energy, Fox provides viable contact points to reach consumers.

Fox also will introduce a number of properties that have a good shot at riding its pop culture energy to success. As a lead-in to "American Idol" results, "Back to You" has proven stars Kelsey Grammer and Patricia Heaton. "The Return of Jezebel James" will be a good fit between the two.

The four dramas Fox unveiled enjoy the strength of solid and compatible surrounding programming. A smart point was made in the presentation that "The Sarah Connor Chronicles" will appear in the same time slot "The X-Files" enjoyed for a number of years. The young male audience that could power it is still to be found in the lead-in comedy block.

Gritty drama "K-Ville" is surrounded by strong programming in "Prison Break" and "24." "Canterbury's Law" looks very strong and can benefit from hit "Are You Smarter Than a Fifth Grader?" On the other hand, going toe-to-toe with CBS's "CSI" and ABC's "Grey's Anatomy" will be tough. "New Amsterdam" has an interesting premise and a good partner in "Bones," but Friday is a difficult night.

There are also a number of unscripted series in the pipeline that could catch lightning in a bottle. Fox is starting to look like the sports franchise everybody hates: It has plenty of the game's best stars under contract and it keeps calling up rookies who can make an immediate impact.

## NBC

Given its recent fortunes, more envelope-pushing might have been expected from NBC. Even so, it offers a number of things valuable to planners. For example, the success of "Heroes" opened up new possibilities for using digital assets. NBC is building on this success with opportunities like the online Bonfire magazine, featured in "Lipstick Jungle," and online soap "Coastal Dreams."

Of new programming, the revisiting of "Bionic Woman" looks the most compelling, and it has Web assets to utilize as well. "Journeyman" doesn't feel very new, but it has a killer lead-in and should do fine. "Singing Bee" also might capture some short-term energy with its new twist on reality programming. Finally, Jerry Seinfeld's "minisodes," capturing behind-the-scenes humor of "Bee Movie," promise to provide interesting interludes through the fall.

As for returning fare, a few shows will be bulking up with more hours of original programming. "Heroes" and "The Office" lead the pack and should be on planners' radar screens. And don't forget the impending 2,400 hours of programming to be broadcast over the multiple NBC platforms from the Summer Olympics in Beijing.

### Implications for Planning

Sitting through the presentations, one glaring fact was the demise of old paradigms. The rules that broadcast TV dictated no longer exist. But that's not bad, it's just change-and change is what creates opportunity.

Although the old paradigms by which TV operated are disappearing, the importance of TV content is not. There are more sources of content than ever and viewers still invest significant chunks of their time consuming them. They just don't consume them based on the networks' rules anymore.

It is evident from the presentations that the networks get the two core pieces of learning here: Content is king and consumers need to be given control of viewing options. The networks appear to be working hard to create content that viewers will find compelling, and they are trying to provide more platforms from which to interact with that content.

Planners need to be part of that creation process. It's not enough to simply cost out and allocate points on a flow chart. A comment made at the NBC presentation summed it up pretty well: "Bring us your ideas and we'll work with you to make them happen." If you're a planner mulling over what was shared in the presentations, the question going through your mind should not be, "What should I buy?"; it should be, "What can I create?"

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