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## Upfronts Get With the Changing Program

**Nets Making Smart Use of Marketplace; So Should Planners**

By Mark Dominiak

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The past couple of weeks have seen a significant amount of ink devoted to the recent upfront presentations hosted by the major broadcast networks. Even though we are weighing in on the back end, the presentations bear additional commentary from the media planning perspective.

There was not the typical level of "We're No. 1" commentary in this year's presentations. Traditionally boring chest-beating was replaced by quite a bit more planner-friendly subject matter. For planners, that's a pleasant surprise-usually they don't leave the presentations with many implications to consider going into planning.

A good number of implications stemmed from the fact that the networks invested significant time acknowledging the impact of consumers moving to other areas of content consumption. All of the networks talked about what they would be doing to try to engage consumers in those new environments. How many times can you say "webisode"? There were even some interesting performance metrics injected here and there to give us an idea of how some of the newer ideas are working.

While it seemed that there were not as many new shows mentioned as in past years, that was not really the case. The way they were presented this year was different, however. By my tally, there are 32 new shows slated for next season, not including the midseason crop. And the way they will be slotted sets up some interesting planning possibilities.

For example, Saturday and Sunday fall evenings shape up as male demo havens, given the advent of NBC's Sunday night NFL football and ABC's Saturday night college football. The fact that there seems to be some schedule flexibility in how the games will be selected suggests performance will remain strong throughout the season.

Thursdays will be interesting to watch. First Fox will use "Til Death" and "Happy Hour" to go toe to toe with NBC's strong comedies "My Name Is Earl" and "The Office." If that wasn't intriguing enough, ABC is taking the positive momentum of "Grey's Anatomy" right into the wheelhouse of CBS's "CSI," while strong performer "The O.C." and "Deal or No Deal" vie as dark horses during a very competitive 9 p.m. hour.

To top it off, it may be a jump ball at 10 p.m., with "ER" on the downswing and two new entries in the mix. Who takes the brass ring between ABC's "Six Degrees" and CBS's "Shark" will likely go a long way to determining Thursday's winner. Regardless of the outcome, the move of "Grey's Anatomy" and quality commodities like James Woods in "Shark" mean that viewers will win on Thursdays and planners can count on quality demos and lighter viewers of television to be present throughout the night.

By network, there are also some interesting developments that could provide opportunities and should be noted by planners.

## ABC

ABC deserves credit for two reasons. First, it may very well have had the best presentation of the week. That's a far cry from just a few years ago. Second, it's not resting on its laurels.

It's gutsy to move a strong performer like "Grey's Anatomy" straight into the teeth of the competition on Thursday. But it's a calculated risk to take to gain strength beyond Sunday and Wednesday. When you also consider ABC has a pretty good chance of dominating on Saturdays with the advent of the NCAA games, it's possible that ABC will strengthen its overall position.

Also, don't forget the promotional possibilities. Moving "Grey's" to a strong viewing night like Thursday and the promotional platform of Saturday football may give ABC the footing to connect with viewers who haven't sampled much of its programming.

Continued strength for "Desperate Housewives," "Lost" and "Dancing With the Stars" can serve as additional tools to drive viewers not only to "Grey's" and Thursdays but to other destinations as well. Planners should give ABC increased consideration this year.

## CBS

As you might expect, CBS and its schedule remain solid. But it's hard to tell whether it is poised to retreat to a defensive position or entrench itself as a worthy competitor.

At what point do longtime hits start to lose steam? There are so many strong returning programs on CBS's schedule that it's hard to imagine that viewers won't start to get burned out at some point. It will be important for CBS to strongly manage its new programs in hopes that one or two can become hits. The best shots are probably "The Class," "Smith" and "Shark."

CBS is also in a strong position to promote its programming with its breadth of Internet media assets and partnerships. In addition to platforms like CBSNews.com and CBSSportsline.com, partnerships with Google's and Verizon's V Cast services will

provide strong distribution channels for content. From a tactical perspective, planners should remember to integrate these powerful CBS elements into plans.

## The CW

The CW's presentation was very interesting—even beyond Chris Rock's outstanding bit. It will be a viable option for planners to consider with its 92 percent U.S. coverage and strong targeting of the 18- to 34-year-old demographic. Further, different aspects of the demo will be targeted on different nights. Younger families on Mondays, young women on Tuesdays and young men on Thursdays are just a few to mention. The block of "Everybody Hates Chris," "All of Us," "Girlfriends," "The Game" and "America's Next Top Model Encore" will provide a real alternative on Sunday nights.

Planners should take note of The CW's strategy for a couple of reasons. First, the focus on specific elements of the demo each night enables consistency throughout the night and is tailor-made for sponsoring nights of the week or for a series of creative units aired over a couple hours' time.

Secondly, The CW will also offer valuable on-air and online components. The CW Lab, where viewers create spots online, and commercial break content wraps are just two of the ideas that planners may find useful to include in plans.

## Fox

Fox really had a lot to talk about, and it certainly has its strategy down pat, but what an underwhelming presentation. Since enough ink has been devoted to improperly pronounced "Tostitos," let's focus on the strategic strength of summer intros, big events and choreographed scheduling to capture viewers via maximized promotion ability.

Fox did a good job acknowledging the subjects of engagement and loyalty, bringing in some interesting data from KMR Point Logic to demonstrate its performance on measures such as intent to purchase and call to action. It also had some interesting news on Internet platforms beyond IdolonFox.com, announcing its partnership with MySpace.com. It's a perfect companion to the core demographics of the network and should provide solid tactical options for planners.

While the point was basically lost in the presentation fiasco, Fox has done a great job in building a quality lineup. Sure, there's "American Idol," the NFL games and playoff baseball. But there is also "House," "24," "Prison Break" and a deep well of animated comedies. There are also some good newcomers to the schedule, including "Vanished," "Justice" and "Til Death," which may give "My Name Is Earl" some problems on Thursday night.

## NBC

NBC did a good job playing the role of humbly getting its act together. Its executives discussed working through challenges and handling adversity while looking to build for the future on its legacy of quality. There were a few worthwhile aspects of NBC's attempts to rebuild evident in its presentation.

To start, the advent of NFL games on Sunday night may be a noteworthy development in two ways. First, it will give NBC a nice platform on which to promote programming at the outset of the season, and second, it will provide a distinct option to the other networks' Sunday fare. Whether or not Sunday NFL is successful may depend upon the strength of match-ups, which NBC will have the flexibility to cherry-pick later in the season, as well as whether or not NFL fever can carry over from games earlier in the day to prime time.

In addition, NBC may have spent the most time of all the networks describing how it will be working hard to reach consumers on a maximum number of platforms (coined as "TV 360"). It will be trying earnestly to use the Web to engage consumers, leveraging those new connection opportunities to showcase unique content. NBC claimed it has 100-plus ideas ready to go regarding content not just created for the TV screen. To power content across all potential contact points, NBC will be

developing programming 52 weeks a year.

Finally, NBC will definitely be trying to discover its next-generation of hits, largely based on dramas. New programs will take their shots for NBC every night between Sunday and Thursday.

On Monday, "Deal or No Deal" will be used to draw viewers to a new quirky drama, "Heroes," which would have been a perfect lead-in for "Medium," but "Medium" will be held for later airing and "Studio 60" will air in its former slot. "Studio 60" looks to be a quality drama and has a chance to lay claim to the time period. Tuesday, NBC will go toe to toe with CBS with dramas, pitting "Friday Night Lights" and a two-hour "Law & Order" block against "NCIS," "The Unit" and "Smith." If "Friday Night Lights" does well, NBC could turn around its fortunes on Tuesdays.

On Wednesdays NBC is debuting two star-powered comedies against a bunch of dramas. The comedies provide good counterprogramming to the other networks and possibly could take off leading into "The Biggest Loser." If viewers hang on, "Kidnapped" may have a chance at 10 p.m.

NBC will find the going very tough on Thursdays, however. "Earl" and "The Office" will face real competition from Fox's new comedies, and "Deal or No Deal" will duke it out with "Grey's Anatomy," "CSI" and "The O.C." In the end, it bodes ill for "ER" at 10 p.m.

Whichever way you slice it, NBC is at least making a valiant effort to reclaim its luster on many fronts. It's likely that many of its efforts will be efficient tactical options for planners to connect with viewers onscreen or at new contact points.

## **MyNetworkTV**

The concept behind MyNetworkTV is very interesting. I must admit that I didn't expect much going in to the presentation, but left thinking that what it is attempting brings a lot strategically to planners.

First of all, MyNetworkTV's 90 percent-plus U.S. coverage by September will allay many planning concerns. Secondly, the likelihood that ratings and demand may not be excessive early on could be a very big efficiency benefit for planners. When you marry those positives with a fresh five-night strip every week in prime time, it should prompt some very interesting planning strategies, both on-air and in a multimedia contact plan. The planning and creative opportunity to build messages and frequency over time is noteworthy.

Finally, when one considers that the strips will essentially renew themselves quarterly, it not only keeps content extremely fresh for viewers but it gives marketers an ongoing chance to connect with those viewers they don't have in the standard broadcast model. And viewers will be able to experience fresh content beyond the television as well, with more than 3,000 pieces of content tailored for mobile and fresh content available online only.

In the end, a lot may hinge on how good a job MyNetworkTV can do to get viewers to the network. If it can do that, then the network may have a good shot at creating a viable new entity that will be attractive to planners as a tactical option.

## **Brave New World**

For a few years now it's basically been the same old, same old at the upfront presentations. This year didn't have that feel at all. The networks appear to be addressing the changing marketplace not just with new programming but with new strategies as well. Add to that two brand-new networks with fresh approaches, content and scheduling, and planners have an awful lot to be excited about as they create brand plans for 2006-07.

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