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Making the Most of the '05 Upfronts

Use Early Knowledge of Fall Broadcast Lineups to Target Series, Genres, Nights, Time Slots for Clients' Brands

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Special to *TelevisionWeek*

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Now that the network upfront presentations are over, buyers and sellers are rolling up sleeves getting ready for the private deal-making soon to come. Planners not only find the negotiation process fascinating but also have a vested interest in the outcome of the deal-making set in motion by presentation week. As such, planners try to attend the presentations to understand how new schedules may impact plans.

For planners, getting into the upfront presentations can be a difficult proposition. Space is limited and because planners are not directly involved in the coming buy discussions, they may find it hard to gain access.

Planners and buyers differ in what they take away from the upfront. For buyers, quantitative thoughts run through the mind: What kinds of numbers will new shows pull? Will the way shows are scheduled generate or maintain ratings?

Planners internalize the presentations with some concern for ratings but are also thinking about qualitative considerations. Beyond how many viewers of what sort may watch a particular program, planners are also interested in what draws viewers to the program. So rankings and demographic info aside, here are some observations from the planner's perspective on the upfront presentations.

In one way, shape or form, the networks talked about the importance of content. The interesting thing was some of them discussed the subject from the perspective of what great content did to keep their numbers strong, while others talked about the importance of content in engaging viewers.

In past years, the networks' perspective has always seemed network first, advertiser second, consumer third. This year it didn't seem that way. At least with three of the networks, the perspective seemed to have evolved to better honor the consumer on the other side of the television set, which from a media planner's perspective is good news for brands.

While there was a healthy bit of "We're No. 1" chest-beating during the week, there were also a number of classy acknowledgements. Particularly interesting was The WB's complimenting of its counterparts, particularly ABC, for what they've done to re-energize television. If that weren't enough, The WB followed by showcasing a number of brand spots as a thank you to advertisers.

A number of interesting observations can be drawn from perusing an overall grid of the 2005-06 season. Including programs that will weave their way onto schedules at some point in the season, around 150 nonsports/event/special programs were discussed in the presentations.

For all the commentary across the networks about how comedy seems to be a struggling genre and how there seem to be no real break-out comedy properties, there will be a lot of comedy on schedules next year. A preliminary tally of 2005-06 prime programs contains 52 programs, or about 35 percent of prime-time programming, categorized as sitcoms, comedy or dramedy. If the comedy genre lament is true, that's potentially a lot of bad comedy on next year's schedule.

Sci-fi/mystery/supernatural dramas will also see a big bump next year, with credit probably due "Lost" and "Smallville" for revitalizing the genre. The preliminary tally here suggests about 10 sci-fi/mystery/supernatural offerings across network schedules for 2005-06. It will be interesting to see whether viewers find the genre as compelling as the networks seem to think it will be.

And a few quick hits:

Does "CBS" stand for "Crime Broadcasting System"? Of the 17 police drama/procedural programs on network schedules, CBS owns nine, or 53 percent.

Movies don't figure very prominently in cemented time slots, but when holiday schedules, movie specials and the large stable of Fox movies are added in, there will be plenty of movies in the network prime-time mix.

"60 Minutes," "20/20," "Dateline," "primetime>live" and "48 Hours: Mystery" are all that's left of the newsmagazines, and it looks as though "48 Hours" is tapping into the crime/mystery momentum to stay vibrant. Jerry Bruckheimer is a hot commodity. New shows "E-Ring" (NBC), "Just Legal" (The WB) and "Close to Home" (CBS) are all Bruckheimer properties.

The networks appear to be willing to try just about anything as they work with advertisers in creative ways to try to get brands into on-air environments.

ABC

With all of the ballyhoo ABC has enjoyed this past season, one might have expected a heavy dose of chest-beating, but that

wasn't the case in ABC's presentation. The network framed up its announcements with the theme of building "a strong emotional connection to viewers with quality, compelling content."

There was some commentary about evolving viewer experiences and embracing new technology. Most interestingly, ABC discussed a shared viewer experience as an opportunity to move and engage people.

"Extreme Makeover: Home Edition" was cited by the network as perhaps the program that best defines the ABC brand and ABC's desire to move viewers through shared experience. From a planner's perspective, programming that can do that will stand a better chance of connecting advertised brands to those same viewers. If ABC can consistently deliver programming against that standard, it will give planners a reason beyond its recent ratings success to consider ABC as an option.

Noteworthy in ABC's 2005-06 schedule is that Sunday's lineup will remain intact. There's good follow-through among viewers on ABC's Sunday shows and brands looking to connect with consumers across an evening of real estate will see that as a benefit.

It's also interesting that other programs with some of that "Extreme Makeover: Home Edition" viewer connectivity, namely "Wife Swap," "Alias" and "Supernanny," are placed as lead-ins to their respective nights, possibly allowing ABC to catch a little of that Sunday magic on Mondays (post-"Monday Night Football"), Thursdays and Fridays-especially considering that interesting properties such as "Emily's Reasons Why Not" and "Night Stalker" will follow those lead-ins.

CBS

There are a lot of compelling reasons for planners to be encouraged about CBS's lineup beyond the fact that "No. 1" was used to describe the network. One important reason is that the CBS lineup is maintaining itself with very few changes. There are only six new programs on the schedule, two each on Monday and Friday and one each on Tuesday and Wednesday, with only a couple of time changes for returning shows.

That's good news from the perspective of viewers who are attached to CBS programming. Those folks won't need to bounce around from day to day in search of their favorite programs. And other than on Friday, the new shows enjoy strong returning lead-ins, giving them a better chance at finding an audience.

Of the new shows, "How I Met Your Mother" and "Out of Practice" maintain CBS's two-hour comedy block on Monday. On Friday, "Ghost Whisperer" seems to be CBS's version of "Medium" and "Threshold" its answer to "Lost." While it might seem a bit "me too," the reality is that those shows provide a good lead-in to "Numb3rs" at 10 p.m. and offer viewers a change of pace from other Friday offerings.

Fox

One can't help but be struck by how consistently different Fox is from its broadcast network brethren. The difference flows from the core adults 18 to 34 audience Fox has chosen as its focus over the years. While the elder networks do a great job of churning out programming for the masses, some of which may score with popular culture, Fox is tapping into popular culture by catering to the young adults who fuel it.

"21 Jump Street," "Married With Children," "The Simpsons," "Beverly Hills 90210" and "The X-Files" have all broken pop culture ground in their own ways. It could even be argued that shows such as "Cops" and "America's Most Wanted" were the first reality programs.

Fox's success not only has allowed it to develop more pop culture-friendly programming but also has turned up enough profitability for the network to buy into big-time sports, including National Football League and Major League Baseball games. That's a significant development, because platforms such as the Super Bowl, the MLB All-Star Game and the World Series not only are important pop culture properties in their own right but also give Fox the ability to promote new offerings to its adults 18 to 34 pop culture jury.

Fox will return pop culture favorites "The Simpsons," "The O.C.," "Arrested Development," "Stacked" and "That '70s Show" to the 2005-06 schedule. It will also mix in new offerings with interesting potential, including "Head Cases" on Wednesday and "Reunion" on Thursday.

There's also "American Idol." It was interesting to hear Fox's commitment to run it only once a year in an effort to keep the franchise fresh and exciting for viewers, a counterstrategy to the "Apprentice"/"Bachelor(ette)" approach of frequency.

It was also noteworthy that Fox discussed its consistency in delivery across demos. Any planner who has done a distribution audit of impressions commonly finds adults 18 to 49 buys tend to overdeliver older demos. On Fox that's not the case. Delivered impressions skew much more evenly across all adults 18 to 49 breaks than the average network. That's important when brands need to reach young adults.

NBC

NBC's demeanor has changed greatly in the past couple of seasons. Amid many humorous swipes at competitors' successes and boasts of being No. 1 with more affluent viewers, NBC demonstrated that it is paying attention to the job that it needs to do. One quote from its presentation sums it up nicely: "When we are challenged, we are creatively courageous."

The network has a solid core from which to build. Along with many high-quality returning shows such as "The West Wing," "ER," "The Apprentice" and "Medium," there is also strength for NBC in morning, news and late-night. Add the 2006 Winter Olympics and NBC will provide brands with many high-quality program environments and its new shows with good incubators.

There are six new shows on NBC's schedule and a couple of interesting comedies in the wings. Some of them have potential to provide the one hit NBC believes will push it back into a leadership position. Most interesting perhaps is "My Name Is Earl," sandwiched on Tuesday between "The Biggest Loser" and "The Office."

Also bearing mention is "The Apprentice: Martha Stewart" on Wednesday, not necessarily because it could be a breakout but because it provides a distinct option to the comedies offered by ABC, CBS and Fox in the same time slot. Finally, there's "Three Wishes," a very "Extreme Makeover: Home Edition"-type show, hosted by Amy Grant, that provides a viable alternative in its 8 p.m. Friday time slot.

UPN

It seems the only upfront presentation I missed was one that generated a good deal of buzz. "Buzz from UPN?" you say. Yes, buzz. New offering "Everybody Hates Chris," inspired by the childhood experiences of and narrated by Chris Rock, is the topic of much conversation. The show has some good potential, kicks off a revamped Thursday strategy and may become a surprising challenger to NBC's monopoly on comedy on the night.

Add to "Everybody Hates Chris" the edgy new drama "Sex, Lies & Secrets" with Denise Richards and "Love, Inc." starring Holly Robinson Peete, and UPN will provide an interesting stable of programming for brands interested in reaching young or black audiences.

The WB

The WB, like Fox, remains committed to reaching younger viewers as a complement to traditional network fare. The difference seems to be that The WB doesn't incorporate the same degree of edginess into its offerings as does Fox. It doesn't seem to suffer at all as a result.

"7th Heaven" is entering its 10th season, remaining in its Monday lead-in spot. That's quite impressive for a family-style drama. The other returning WB dramas, "Gilmore Girls," "One Tree Hill," "Smallville" and "Everwood," can also be considered

consistent performers, but with the latter three it will be interesting to see whether their new time slots are beneficial.

The WB's aforementioned Bruckheimer offering "Just Legal" has some potential, as does sisters drama "Related." "Supernatural" is The WB's new, well, supernatural drama. It will provide a programming contrast to the other offerings in its time period.

"Twins," starring Sara Gilbert and newcomer Molly Stanton, is also among the scheduled new offerings from The WB. Counting the potential replacement series "Pepper Dennis," "Bedford Diaries" and "Modern Men," one thing is sure: The WB will continue to offer compelling programming aimed at young adults. Some of the new offerings may die on the vine, but there should be one or two winners here for The WB-good news for brands looking to connect with young adult viewers.

Wrapping Up

So what's a planner to do with all of this new information? Here are a few quick suggestions:

Take the most recent MRI study available to you and do your own grouping of programs by genre. Design it to reflect what the networks have developed 2005-06 against, for example, police procedurals, benevolent reality, sci-fi/mystery/supernatural drama, etc. It doesn't matter if the shows you lump in are old. Just get a feel for whether or not your target likes the more narrowly defined genre.

Lump programs together by network, by network by evening and by a narrower time slot definition, such as early prime or late prime. Get a feel for places where your target may hang out more than others.

Cross your findings with the proposed new schedules to identify which of the new offerings or new time slots may be ripe for your brand and pass along that information to your buying team in advance of coming negotiations.

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