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Media Business  
October 10, 2005

## Innovation Scarce in Fall Ad Campaigns

Use TV's Momentum as Opportunity to Up the Creative Ante

By Mark Dominiak

Special to *TelevisionWeek*

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Like many of you, I've invested quite a bit of time over the past few weeks trying to catch as many of the season premieres on the broadcast and cable networks as I can.

I always have a dual agenda. The first is selfish: I've waited since May for "Lost" to resume to find out what's in the hatch on the island, and I couldn't wait for the castaways to start descending into that dark little hole. But as a media person, I'm also very interested to see what networks, entertainment companies and brands have "hatched" to engage viewers and prompt sales at a time of year when a high degree of attention is paid to program offerings.

It seems that the cumulative vote of the viewing public at the end of the 2004-05 season was a positive one. It seemed to be saying, "Hey television, you're more interesting. Bring on some more of that stuff. What else have you got?"

Given concerns about erosion, the impact of digital video recorder technology and the emergence of engagement as a potential performance metric, one would think that the television industry and media planners would view the 2005-06 season as a great opportunity. So at this early point in the season, how do we all seem to be faring?

## **Programming**

Baseball playoffs will be in full swing this week, and the real fall schedules won't settle in until after the fall classic is complete. Yet even this early in the game, a couple of things are evident.

First of all, ABC's 2004-05 hits are no fluke. "Desperate Housewives," "Grey's Anatomy," "Lost" and "Extreme Makeover: Home Edition" haven't lost a beat. "Boston Legal" may indeed be a good fit for Tuesday.

CBS seems to have its formula clicking along nicely, and Fox will feed off of baseball energy in advance of "American Idol."

So what about all of the new offerings? There are some positives out there. "My Name Is Earl" and "Three Wishes" are providing hope for NBC and are at least some bright spots, given that "Must-See TV" is about to become a Trivial Pursuit answer.

UPN looks like it's got the real deal with "Everybody Hates Chris." My sheer enjoyment in the premiere was curtailed. As my kids and I laughed along with the premiere, my wife cracked down and flipped the channel, deeming the content a bit much for our pre-teens. Thank goodness for videotape and TiVo.

The WB's "Supernatural" has good possibilities. "Gilmore Girls" seems as feisty as ever, and even "Smallville" and "Everwood" may not fare too badly given Thursday night's changing dynamic.

In general, the season so far suggests that the cream of network offerings may be maintaining or even increasing the momentum of last year's renewed interest in television.

Even more fortuitously, the new NFL season is in full swing and the very interesting 2005 baseball season is playoff-happy. Those two venues provide excellent platforms for promoting returning and new shows. There's good reason to believe that television's small resurgence has a chance to get a little stronger.

But are we taking advantage of this momentum bump in other ways?

## **Network Initiatives**

On the network side of the coin, there seems to have been very little of interest done to engage viewers in new and innovative ways.

Some small examples stood out at the beginning of the season. Two of the aforementioned new program offerings, "Supernatural" and "Everybody Hates Chris" engaged a couple of powerful Web partners to offer a little something extra for viewers.

In "Supernatural's" case, The WB partnered with Yahoo! to give a sneak peek of the show in advance of its planned airing. "Supernatural's" premiere episode was available Sept. 6-12, the end date just in advance of the on-air premiere Sept. 13. The WB smartly put "Supernatural" in front of the right audience for the show. Not only did the placement generate quite a bit of media buzz, it is likely that significant word of mouth was also generated on behalf of the show.

UPN on the other hand teamed up with Google to provide an exclusive online screening of the premiere episode of "Everybody

Hates Chris." UPN benefited because it gave potential viewers who missed the episode a chance to watch at their leisure. Google benefited because it was able to not only show off its video service but to tout new enhancements as well.

Beyond the uniqueness and buzz-building quotient both executions generated, it shouldn't be overlooked that both Yahoo! and Google can be substantive gateways into broader Internet communities. Putting their programs at two of the Internet's busiest hubs has likely helped both networks attract a broader audience for their shows.

## **Brand Initiatives**

In looking at what brands are implementing in the new season environment, there is also very little that stands out from the crowd. To be sure, there have been quite a few new campaigns breaking in conjunction with the new season. That's to be expected. But is there anyone out there pushing the envelope in interesting ways that imply planners are trying to take their television plans to new levels?

Take a moment to think about it from your own viewing experience during the first few weeks of the new season. Have you seen brands doing anything really interesting that seems to point the way to noteworthy plan innovation? It's not easy to come up with examples.

Some of you may remember that at the beginning of the year I mentioned careerbuilder.com and its strategic selection of the Super Bowl and other big first-quarter events to launch its new TV campaign.

Over the spring and summer, careerbuilder.com was elusive at best. But lo and behold, in "Lost's" season premiere, once again the chimps were harassing that poor guy in the office. Careerbuilder.com deserves some credit for sticking to its strategy. My guess is that it's probably working; if the big-event platforms of first quarter hadn't worked for them, I can't imagine the client would have agreed to purchase a bevy of season premieres as part of an upfront package. But as interesting as it is to see careerbuilder.com resurface, the strategic approach isn't bar-raising.

I could catch only some small examples of innovation. Many of you may have invested time with The Weather Channel during September, given the impact Hurricanes Katrina and Rita had on the country.

Tuned into The Weather Channel on Sept. 22, the first day of fall, I noticed a small but interesting twist in its "Local on the 8's" segment. What caught my eye was the Quaker Oats logo in the top right corner of the screen.

As I watched, it became evident that TWC was celebrating the first day of autumn and that Quaker Oats was sponsoring. There were other billboard-type placements and a number of spots airing in adjacent breaks. While Quaker Oats' effort wasn't groundbreaking, I did find it interesting that it was able to secure the logo on the local segment. That's something I hadn't seen before. Timing of its effort was also well-conceived, reminding consumers about oatmeal at the change of season, conceivably when viewers might start to feel a nip in the air.

A final mention goes to AOL for the neat little bug appearing on NBC in "My Name Is Earl." During the show, the little AOL guy popped up in the lower left corner of the screen and the placement morphed into a message encouraging viewers to visit AOL for an "Earl" outtake. I visited AOL and ended up enjoying the outtake very much.

## **Innovate Now**

There are good returning shows and interesting new entries to be excited about in this new season. There are also some interesting tweaks to execution being implemented by the networks and some brands. Positive momentum suggests the environment is ripe for innovation.

In this age of cutting-edge technology and take-control consumers, planners and the television industry need to aggressively take advantage of this opportunity to raise the bar. We need to bring offerings to the table that surprise and delight consumers, including compelling programming choices and media placements that create more marketplace impact for brands. But if the

evidence in so far for the 2005-06 season is any indication, we're not raising the bar very well.

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