

Scheduling Strategies for Television

In this chapter you will learn about the following:

- The importance of scheduling decisions
- The scheduling strategies of commercial and cable networks
- How the urge to compete molds schedules
- How sweeps affect schedules
- How changing a show's time slot on the schedule can improve a show's performance
- How patience or the lack of it can affect a program's success

To construct a successful programming lineup, programmers must do more than just fill the time periods. Many TV shows that, at first blush, seemed to contain all the right ingredients for a long and profitable life have had short and painful demises for reasons apart from their inherent merit. Programs not only have to be developed but also have to be nurtured. Too many productions have simply been tossed on the air with no plan, no promotion, no lead-in, and therefore, no chance.

Once programmers have produced a promising show, they must be equally adept at placing and treating it on the schedule. The time period, the competition, and the receptivity of the audi-

ence are all factors to be assessed before the show is committed to the schedule.

TELEVISION SCHEDULING

Many of the strategies used in scheduling commercial television can be found in cable. There are differences, but more similarities exist. Clearly, both share a desire to program to the available audience and a desire to employ scheduling techniques that will work the best for them. Commercial stations, cable systems, and satellite providers all want to protect their programming with the best possible schedules.

It is different with syndication. Syndicators sell to stations and rarely, at least initially, are able to dictate time periods. After a syndicated show has been on the air awhile and has developed a large following, the distributor may be strong enough to demand a specific position on the schedule. One suspects, for example, that when Oprah Winfrey's company, Harpo, launched "Dr. Phil," she was able to require that "Dr. Phil" not compete directly with her and that it be given a good time slot. (In Los Angeles, Oprah airs at 3:00 P.M. on ABC and "Dr. Phil" airs at 4:00 P.M. on NBC.) Certain shows are designed for a particular daypart and cannot be sched-

uled effectively anywhere else. But the syndicators mostly sell the shows, and the stations place them whenever they wish.

Ideally, programmers seek a large audience with the leadoff show and structure the programs that follow so that the audience will watch continuously throughout the schedule. This is not always possible. Sometimes a competitor's opening program will be an established blockbuster that makes it impossible for others to start effectively. Other times the competitor's strength may be in the middle of the schedule. Then, the only strategy is to ride out the "bad" period and attempt to rebuild when the power block is over and the audience is released.

When putting together a schedule, programmers should consider the elements described in the sections that follow.

Fitting the Show to the Available Audience

As we explained earlier, most programs have a primary appeal to a particular audience. For example, action-adventure appeals principally to men, sitcoms to women, contemporary music to teens, serials to younger women, and talk shows and game shows to older women. Occasionally, a particular show will attract an almost universal audience, as when more than 90% of all the homes in the country watched at least one episode of "Roots" when it was initially aired in 1977. Often something of a current nature, such as the coverage of a war or disaster, will also have wide appeal. But generally the primary appeal of a show is to a specific demographic group.

Therefore, a program must be placed at a time in which its core viewers are available. It makes no sense to schedule

a show with a predominant teen appeal on a Saturday night. That audience is not home. They are at movie theaters, basketball games, or anywhere other than in front of the set with mom and dad.

ABC relearned this lesson in the 1990-1991 season. The network bucked the conventional wisdom and scheduled a nightlong lineup for the 18 to 34 year olds: "The Young Riders," "Twin Peaks," and "China Beach" (replaced midseason by "Under Cover"). ABC hoped that if it built the franchise, the young viewers would come. They did not. In the last week of their Saturday telecasts, "Twin Peaks" and "Under Cover" were tied for 85th place among 89 programs rated by Nielsen. But late Saturday night? That is something different. Many young viewers have returned home by then and are eager for entertainment, as "Saturday Night Live" has impressively proved for more than 4 decades.

When buying syndicated shows, station programmers look for series appropriate to the time period. Whenever possible, a network affiliate will try to buy a syndicated show that coordinates with a network lead-in (assuming the lead-in is strong) to continue the audience flow.

Before locking in a program, programmers must study the time period's demographic history. If the target audience is underrepresented, a more favorable position should be sought. No matter how strong the show, if the key viewers are not available, the project will fail.

Dayparting

Closely related to the principle of fitting the show to the available audience is the concept of dayparting. People's needs, activities, and moods change throughout the day, and dayparting takes this into

account by changing what is presented and how it is presented.

In the morning, when people first wake up, they often want information to help them plan the day—weather, traffic reports, and important news. Because most people must go to work, they do not have a great deal of time to spend with media. That is why many of the morning shows are divided into short segments. Early morning is also a time when young children watch television, often as their parents are getting ready for work. The children's cable channel, Noggin, for example, offers a pre-school block in the mornings.

As the morning wears on, people who spend time with television are able to do so in a more leisurely fashion. As a result, game shows, soap operas, and talk shows dominate daytime TV.

In the midafternoon, students return home from school. Many television stations change programming fare to appeal to these children. In the afternoon, Noggin offers "Bob the Builder," "Dora the Explorer," and "Oswald." After 6:00 P.M., Noggin appeals to older children, filling out its dayparting schedule for children from the youngest in the mornings to the oldest in the early evening.

As people begin arriving home from work, many TV stations switch from programming oriented toward children and homemakers to news. This allows adults to catch up on the day's events.

The evening is the time for the most leisurely TV viewing of all—the time when all categories of viewers are, in theory at least, able to spend several hours with one or more programs. Comedy, drama, and reality are the primary fare during these hours.

From 11:30 P.M. until 12:30 or 1:00 A.M., the talk/variety form presented in segments has been most popular for two basic reasons: people who are preparing for sleep generally do not want to be

overstimulated, and viewers turn in for the night at varying times. Segmented shows permit people to switch off the set after an interview has been completed. In this way, a programmer is able to attract a large number of viewers for at least part of a show. If a 2-hour movie was scheduled, the viewer might be tempted to say, "I can't watch all of it; therefore, I won't watch any of it."

Stations that stay on through the early morning hours, as a service to insomniacs or night workers who do not want to retire as soon as they come home, usually fill the time with inexpensive movies or, on cable, paid programming in the form of infomercials. This is more for economic reasons than daypart strategy. Lately, networks have been supplying news to their affiliates during the wee hours, and a small but devoted audience of news junkies have tuned in.

On the weekend, programming changes dramatically to accommodate the lifestyle of the audience. The daytime lineups are studded with sporting events to reach the male viewers available in abundance. Saturday morning is often devoted to children's programming to accommodate early-rising children and their late-rising parents. Saturday evening schedules are canted toward the older audience in recognition of the absence of teens and young adults. Sunday morning on the networks is wall-to-wall news and public affairs programming. This is partly to take advantage of the availability of adults who have the time to digest the news in deeper more thoughtful quantities, but it is also a way to pay off public service obligations in a commercially insensitive time period. Networks and stations can point with pride to these estimable service shows whenever their community consciousness is called into question without sacrificing large profits in the process.

| Eastern Standard Time | Program |
|-----------------------|---|
| 6:00 A.M. | "Sesame Street" |
| 7:06 A.M. | "Arthur" |
| 7:43 A.M. | "Clifford the Big Red Dog" |
| 8:20 A.M. | "Dragon Tales" |
| 8:57 A.M. | "Mister Rogers' Neighborhood" |
| 9:34 A.M. | "Barney & Friends" |
| 10:11 A.M. | "Teletubbies" |
| 10:47 A.M. | "Sesame Street" |
| 11:53 A.M. | "Mister Rogers' Neighborhood" |
| 12:30 P.M. | "On Q" |
| 1:00 P.M. | "Hot and Spicy" |
| 2:00 P.M. | "Hot and Spicy" |
| 3:00 P.M. | "Between the Lions" |
| 3:36 P.M. | "Arthur" |
| 4:12 P.M. | "Liberty's Kids" |
| 4:48 P.M. | "Clifford the Big Red Dog" |
| 5:24 P.M. | "Cyberchase" |
| 6:00 P.M. | "The NewsHour with Jim Lehrer" |
| 7:00 P.M. | "Nightly Business Report" |
| 7:30 P.M. | "On Q" |
| 8:00 P.M. | "Dr. Wayne Dyer: The Power of Intention" |
| Midnight | "On Q" |
| 12:30 A.M. | "Charlie Rose" |
| 1:30 A.M. | "Dr. Wayne Dyer: The Power of Intention" |
| 5:30 A.M. | "America's Home Cooking: Casseroles and Covered Dishes" |

Figure 9.1
This schedule for March 8, 2004, for WQED in Pittsburgh is a typical PBS schedule.

Public television stations determine their own dayparting to a much greater degree than the commercial stations affiliated with NBC, CBS, ABC, and Fox. The contract signed between commercial networks and affiliates penalizes a station if it does not run a program when the network wants it to run. Such

is not the case with PBS, although in recent years informal pressure has been placed on the major PBS affiliates to run most of the programs at set times. The reason behind this change is that PBS wants to develop national promotional campaigns that tell all viewers exactly when they can expect to see a particular program on their local PBS station. But stations often have minds of their own regarding what time of day certain programs should air in their communities.

Although procedures differ from station to station, most public TV stations daypart, often with shows for children in the mornings and afternoons; programs for women during midday when children are likely to be napping; and news, interviews, and self-help shows throughout the evening into late night (Figure 9.1).

Launching the Show: The First Strategy

For a program to be a success, it must first be sampled. If viewers are unaware of a show, the early ratings will be weak and the series likely will languish quickly. In a soft economic environment, buyers are disinclined to stay with programs that do not instantly indicate promise. Programmers have devised two strategies to hasten the sampling process: introduce the show in a quiet time, and place the premiere when a large audience is virtually guaranteed.

Introducing the Show in a Quiet Time.

For many years, the television season was clearly set: it started in the fall and ended in the spring. One reason for this was that business affairs executives insisted that the networks could not afford to air original programs in the summer, ad rates being lower in the summer when viewership is down. To

make the shows financially feasible, they argued, it was essential to schedule reruns in the summer.

Competition, the proliferation of viewer options, the marketplace, and the proliferation of reality shows that do not repeat well have helped create a season that runs virtually all year. This has enabled programmers to avoid putting their shows up against heavy competition in the fall or even at the start of the so-called second season in the spring. It is thus a little easier to find a quiet time to introduce a show, avoiding the cluttered "premiere week" of old when only a few shows could survive. There is still a lot of talk and speculation about the shows that will launch a fall season, but this hype belies that a "season" is now essentially year round.

Fox is generally credited with having led the trend toward the expansion to the year-round "season." In the summer of 1991, Peter Chernin, president of Fox Entertainment, declared that his company had fallen into the same "self-destructive" practice of launching all new shows in the fall. He noted that the previous season the four networks had "introduced 34 new series as if it was a massacre. Seventy-five percent failed. No other business debuts its product like that. No longer at Fox. We will roll out new series in every month of the year."¹

His new plan went into effect in July 1991 with the premiere of "Beverly Hills, 90210." "In the first week," Chernin claimed, "it showed an 84% improvement over its '90-'91 average."² By mid-fall it was second in its time period, topped only by the formidable veteran, "Cheers."

Not every show that premieres in an off time becomes a hit, but Fox again showed prodigious off-season results in the summer of 2002 with the reality show "American Idol" and in the summer of 2003 when it introduced its

series "The O.C.," about the lives and loves of teenagers in Orange County, California.

USA network, for example, launches its original programming outside of sweeps to get sampling and awareness in a quiet time.

Placing the Show in a Hit Time Period.

A favorite launching strategy is to schedule a newcomer after a monster event, the Super Bowl being the ideal choice. Hardly a year goes by that the network carrying the game does not introduce a new show behind it in the hope that the largest audience of the year will like what it sees and an instant hit will be born. Sometimes it works and sometimes it does not. Although the results vary, the strategy is fundamentally sound. There is no better way to get a program sampled than to place it immediately following a blockbuster event.

A variation of this strategy is to time slot a newcomer in a time period that follows a powerhouse series, such as "Frasier," as NBC did with "Scrubs," or "Everybody Loves Raymond," as CBS did with "Two and a Half Men."

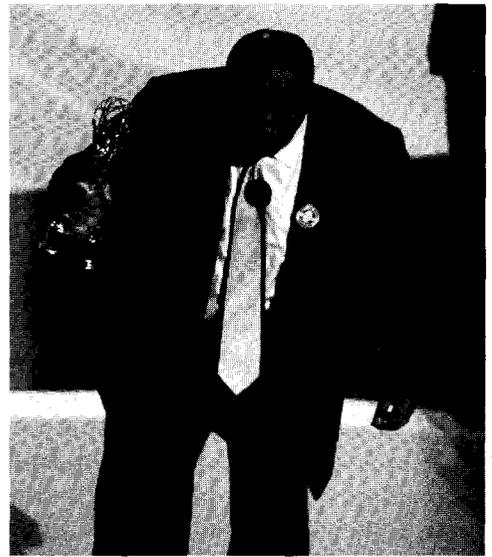
Many industry observers would agree with Alan Wurtzel, NBC's president of research and media development, that 50% of all households that will ever watch a program will get hooked by one of the first two episodes. Obviously, the sooner they sample these shows, the better. This is why broadcasters strive so tirelessly to develop new techniques to bring viewers into the tent from the beginning.

HBO has found an effective way to capitalize on its own version of a hit time period. Because of the success of "Sex and the City" and "The Sopranos," HBO found that by alternating these two shows in the same time period, it could command the Sunday 9:00 P.M. period. HBO may launch most of its

Figure 9.2
 “The Sopranos”
 (a and b) and
 “Sex and the
 City” (c)
 established a
 stronghold for
 HBO on Sunday
 nights at 9:00.
 (Photo of Edie
 Falco and James
 Gandolfini from
 “The Sopranos”
 courtesy the
 Academy of
 Television Arts &
 Sciences; photo
 of “Sex and the
 City” from
 Globe Photos,
 Inc.)



(a)



(b)



(c)

Even though a new show may achieve a higher share of audience in July than in September, the pie is so much smaller that the total audience may still fall short of a conventional launch.

Second, January premieres run into station clearance difficulties. Station managers who commit to programs in the fall are frequently locked into pay-or-play contracts for at least 26 weeks. For purely economic reasons, they may wish to stay with a failing show until the full commitment is satisfied, particularly during a recessionary period. Programs launched in January may have to struggle for months with subpar lineups until additional time periods break open.

To repeat, the first objective of a launch is to get the program sampled. Any technique of timing that enables the program to be introduced when it will confront the least competition is desirable. However, this advantage must be weighed against the less attractive factors of starting in a period of low set usage, being forced to schedule reruns in high HUT months when opponents will be running original episodes, and offering a show for sale when many buyers cannot accommodate it.

original movies Saturday nights, but it has also managed to carve out this Sunday night stronghold (Figure 9.2).

Launching Syndicated Series. There are two major factors militating against any sort of wholesale departure from fall premieres for syndicated shows. First, summer **households using television (HUT)** and **persons using television (PUT)** levels are considerably lower than those in the fall–spring period.

Tentpoling

You have just seen that one of the best ways to gain sampling for a show is to introduce it behind a big hit. The same principle can be applied to programs struggling elsewhere on the schedule. By moving these next to hits, they can often be revived and enjoy healthy, lengthy runs.

Sometimes a powerhouse show is strong enough to hold up programs both before and after it. If a new show is scheduled right before a popular program, people tuning in early in anticipation of the hit will sample the end of the new entry. Hopefully, they will be intrigued and tune in the next week for the entire show. Placing an established show before a hit is not as strong a programming strategy as placing it after, but the method can work.

This concept of scheduling weak or new programs around a strong show is referred to as **tentpoling**—the pole in the middle holds up the two weaker shows, especially the one that follows.

The Fox network made excellent use of tentpoles when it expanded the number of evenings it broadcast. It had developed a strong Sunday lineup that included “The Simpsons,” “America’s Most Wanted,” and “Married . . . With Children.” When it expanded to more nights of programming in 1990, it used these popular programs as anchors for the other nights—“The Simpsons” on Thursday, “America’s Most Wanted” on Friday, and “Married . . . With Children” on Sunday. Fox has used this strategy several times over the years. For example, after “Malcolm in the Middle” established itself by following “The Simpsons,” Fox moved it to Sundays at 9:00 P.M. in the 2002–2003 season, where it became another tentpole for the network.

Tentpoling was far more effective in the precable era, when program choices

were fewer and the remote control unit had not yet been invented. The long walk from the couch to the set was more exercise than most viewers cared for, and given a reasonable excuse to stay put, they would. Today they can whiz through 30 channels before the next show’s opening credits have rolled, and the pass-along strategy is less assured.

Nevertheless, it continues its usefulness. “A Different World,” a comedy spin-off of the “The Cosby Show” was introduced in September 1987 immediately following the parent program, which, at that time, was the No. 1 show on television. The derivative production was an instant success and remained in the Top 10 for 4 years, although the show was often dismissed as simply riding on the “Cosby” coattails. This dismissal was unfair, as revealed by the number of seemingly compatible shows that have failed following “Friends,” one of the most successful shows in television history. Four years as a Top 10 show does not just happen as a result of fortuitous placement on a schedule.

Station managers use this same tentpoling strategy with blockbuster syndication series. When “Jeopardy” was launched in its third incarnation in 1984, it was placed behind the triumphant “Wheel of Fortune” in many markets. It quickly became an enormous success and helped form an invulnerable hour of dominance. Although PBS does not carry out scheduling strategies with the same fanaticism as the commercial and cable networks, it also has its tentpole shows, programs such as “American Masters,” “Great Performances,” “Mystery,” and “The NewsHour with Jim Lehrer.”

Hammocking

Probably the surest way to generate an audience for a new program is to slot it

between two established shows, called the **hammock** principle. With power in front and power behind, the new program benefits from both the pass-along viewing from the preceding show and the anticipated entertainment from the following program. Hammocking is a frequently employed strategy. For example, it is often seen in children's cartoon blocks in which a newcomer is sandwiched between two established series.

Expectations are higher with hammocked shows, such as NBC's "Jesse" or "Cursed." Placed between "Friends" and "Will & Grace," these shows were simply unable to take advantage of being in prime television real estate in 1999 and 2000, respectively, and were quickly canceled.

A story (possibly apocryphal) is told about ABC President Leonard Goldenson in the early days of the network, when a running joke was "They ought to put the Vietnam War on ABC—it would be canceled in 13 weeks." Goldenson observed that his competitors were separating two hits and sliding a new show in between. Impressed by this strategy, he supposedly asked his programming chief, "Why don't we do that?" "Because, Leonard," came the response, "we don't have two hits."

Counterprogramming

No program, no matter how popular, can satisfy all viewers. The neglected or dissatisfied audience becomes a good target for competing shows. The tactic of filling a time period with a program whose appeal is dissimilar to an opponent's is called counterprogramming.

The 1991 three-network prime-time lineup Tuesday nights (Fox did not provide programming Tuesday nights in 1991) provides a good example of this device from television history. From

8:00 to 9:00 P.M., ABC scheduled two situation comedies, the second of which, "Home Improvement" was a promising newcomer comfortably placed between the well-established "Full House" and the No. 1-rated series, "Roseanne." CBS countered with "Rescue 911," a fast-paced "actuality" adventure, and NBC introduced "I'll Fly Away," a soft, family-value-focused, dramatic series. In the 9:00 to 10:00 P.M. hour, ABC continued its comedy skein with the aforementioned "Roseanne" and "Coach," a show that had blossomed into a hit in its enviable time period. Again, the two competitors had to seek an alternative audience. CBS elected to present feature films, and NBC offered "In the Heat of the Night," a law enforcement adventure series. To close out the night, ABC decided to try a new family drama, "Homefront," in the belief that the lineup's tremendous momentum would pass along a large audience to the newcomer and give it a good chance of success. CBS played the second half of its movie, and NBC followed "In the Heat of the Night" with another crime-and-punishment series, "Law & Order." This nightlong effort on the part of each broadcaster to carve away an audience on which the others are not concentrating is classic counterprogramming strategy.

Going to Tuesday nights for the 2002 season, six networks were competing against each other instead of three. ABC submitted a comedy block from 8:00 to 10:00 P.M., leading into the steady "NYPD Blue," even though it had no hit show to use as a tentpole and did not have two hits shows to use for a hammock. NBC also went with comedy from 8:00 to 10:00 P.M. Although it had a strong show in "Frasier" to use as a tentpole, "Hidden Hills" proved a failure. NBC went with a news show at 10:00 P.M. to compete with the dramas on CBS and ABC. CBS went with

older-skewing dramas for the entire night. Fox countered with a hipper drama, "24," at 9:00 P.M. and used its hit show, "That '70s Show," to jumpstart its night against the competing comedies. "Gilmore Girls" on the WB and "Buffy the Vampire Slayer" on UPN went head to head, targeting the younger demographics at 8:00 P.M., followed at 9:00 P.M. by "Smallville" on the WB and "Haunted" on UPN; "Smallville" won that battle. Six competitors from 8:00 to 10:00 P.M. (and back to three at 10:00 P.M.) makes counterprogramming more complex because the shares of the pie are bound to be a lot smaller, particularly with the influx of cable.

When an opponent has tried to stake a claim on a particular audience but has done so with a relatively weak entry, the best strategy may be to go after that audience with a stronger version of the same genre. If the move is successful, the challenger will capture the viewers and seriously erode the opponent's audience base not only for that time period but possibly for the ensuing ones.

It seems strange that two medical dramas would be scheduled against each other, particularly when schedules are so carefully put together with counterprogramming in mind. This, however, was the case in September 1994 when CBS scheduled "Chicago Hope" at 10:00 P.M. on Thursdays and NBC scheduled "ER" at the same time. It was immediately clear that "ER" had megahit written all over it and that if "Chicago Hope" had any chance of survival, it needed to be moved, quickly. In October 1994, "Chicago Hope" was moved an hour earlier on Thursdays, and in December 1994, it was moved to Monday nights at 10:00 when, under David E. Kelley's masterful hand, it established itself as a solid hit for CBS. Had the network not acted to protect the show, "Chicago Hope" might not have been able to survive the "ER" juggernaut.

This "ER"—"Chicago Hope" scenario raises the question, "What do you do against a monster hit?" Network executives have wrestled with this problem from "I Love Lucy" in the 1950s through the "The Cosby Show" in the 1980s and "ER" in the 1990s to "CSI" starting in 2000. The temptation is to throw up a test pattern, abandon the time period, and hope no one will notice. A pleasant fantasy, but unrealistic. At times programmers have decided to cut their losses and fill the period with the most inexpensive programming available. A strong case can be made for fiscal prudence, but there is a big risk to simply not showing up.

For one thing, stations have to sell commercials around the period, and the spots will be worthless if the program does not register. Also, such a lack of effort says all the wrong things to the company's many constituents (advertisers, investors, etc.). Most executives feel it is best to try something experimental. There is not much to lose, and, who knows, they might just get lucky. Even if it does not work, critics and commentators will applaud the innovative effort and this will help ease the pain of a stricken time period.

Sylvester L. "Pat" Weaver, president of NBC-TV in the early 1950s, recalled, "Whenever the other guys came up with a big winner, I knew it was time to call in my zanies, the guys with the off-the-wall ideas. I knew no conventional show could make it, but maybe something really unusual might click."

ABC scored strongly with this strategy in 1990. CBS's "Murder, She Wrote," preceded by the powerhouse "60 Minutes," had been delivering hammer blows to the opposition since 1984. ABC decided to take a flyer on a program that featured home videotapes shot by ordinary citizens. The novel concept caught on and "America's Funniest Home Videos" became a perennial

Figure 9.3

"The Bachelor" (a) was successfully scheduled against *"The West Wing."* It made the rose ceremony into a nationwide watercooler phenomenon. Its success led to the spin-off *"The Bachelorette"* (b). (Photos © ABC Photography Archives.)

**(a)****(b)**

deliver solid, if unspectacular, ratings at an affordable cost to the network.

There are times when it is an excellent strategy to take on a blockbuster hit. The timing must be right, but if it is, the colossus can be toppled. Two conditions are required: the incumbent hit must be in a waning state and the challenger must be a promising show in the early stages of its ascent. These are two critical and delicate judgments for the programmer, and if either is wrong the venture will fail.

When ABC's head scheduler, Jeff Bader, sensed that NBC's prestige drama, *"The West Wing,"* was vulnerable in the fall of 2002, he felt the timing was right to pit an unscripted series, *"The Bachelor,"* against it (Figure 9.3). He was dead on, and the strong, younger demographics that *"The Bachelor"* and its companion piece, *"The Bachelorette,"* garnered made the victory even sweeter.

Similarly, CBS's *Les Moonves* was able to take on NBC's seemingly impenetrable Thursday night *"Must See*

"safety valve" used by ABC as a quick fix when other scheduling was not working. Its ratings never achieved the heights that they did at the start, but the show could always be counted on to

TV" by moving "Survivor" (Figure 9.4) and "CSI" to Thursday nights in 2001, adding "Without a Trace" to the mix to create a powerful assault on NBC's former stronghold.

For independent stations, counter-programming remains simply a way of life. They must always examine the schedules of their network-affiliated opponents and go after the audience left unattended.

Bridging and Supersizing

The less opportunity the audience has to sample your adversary's program, the better chance you have for success. If you have something compelling unfolding when the competition is about to start, you distract the viewer from the temptation to stray.

The most effective use of this strategy is to have a program under way well in advance of the competitor's start time. Networks and stations have often scheduled shows to begin before the start of a powerful opposing show. Viewers who have invested a full hour in a program are unlikely to break away for something else. **Bridging** takes place at different times during the day. For example, the highly rated, long-lasting (it began in 1971) CBS soap, "The Young and the Restless" starts a half hour earlier than the other soaps.

A variation on the bridging strategy is to edit a longform program so that the competitor's start time is spanned by entertainment. Take, for example, a 9:00 to 10:00 P.M. program opposed by 2 half hours. If the producer of the hour-long program schedules a 2-minute commercial from 9:25 to 9:27 P.M., a strong piece of action can be unfolding at 9:30 P.M. when the second of the 2 half hours is about to begin.

Going seamlessly from one show to the next without any commercial inter-



ruptions became popular at the start of the new century as a means of bridging two shows. This continuous action seeks to hook viewers before they have a chance to go elsewhere. And some shows start a few seconds before the hour or half hour, refusing to allow viewers to jump ship.

Supersizing, adding 10 minutes to a half-hour show such as "Friends" or an extra half hour to an hour-long reality phenomenon such as "Fear Factor," also became popular as a bridging strategy in the early 21st century, pioneered by NBC Entertainment President Jeff Zucker. The theory behind supersizing is that viewers enjoying extra time with one of their favorite shows will not turn the dial to another show already in progress. Supersizing is clearly fun and it has been working, although programmers should be wary of overusing it; the novelty can wear off.

As with many other programming strategies, bridging has been affected by the invention of the remote tuner. During commercial breaks, hyperactive TV viewers may zip to five or six channels to find other fare or just to satisfy their curiosity as to what else is playing. If the program they have been watching has been intriguing enough, they will return. But if something else catches

Figure 9.4
"Survivor" host Jeff Probst is flanked by executive producers Mark Burnett and Charlie Parsons as they celebrate the success of their show. (Courtesy the Academy of Television Arts & Sciences.)

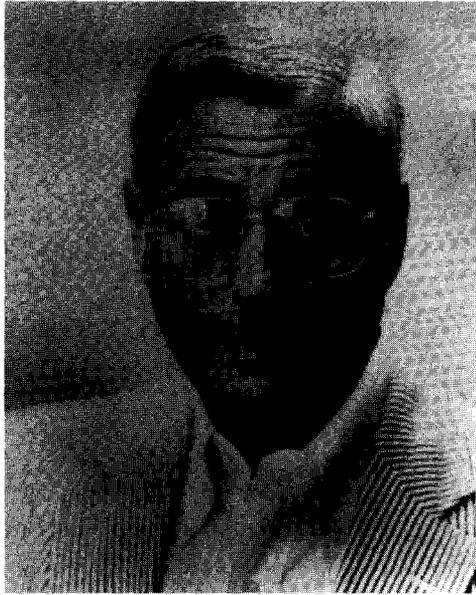


Figure 9.5
Legendary programmer Fred Silverman is recognized as the founder of blunting. (Courtesy the Academy of Television Arts & Sciences.)

their fancy, even though it may be almost over, they may become a lost viewer.

Blunting

A cousin to bridging is **blunting**. The goal is the same: minimize the competitor's opportunity to be sampled. Except under the direst emergencies, the premieres of all programs are announced many weeks in advance. The need for notification to advertisers and affiliated stations, plus the time to rev up a promotion campaign, makes last-minute introductions impractical. In a world where competition is king and dominating your opponent often takes precedence over thoughtful programming decisions, the long lead period enables rivals to fashion competitive strategies.

So how do you keep your competitive edge by blunting the opposition? Strong, explosive episodes with marquee guest stars can be used. So can a special program that combines celebrities with other high-appeal elements. A major motion picture featuring a recently announced Academy Award nominee can receive a "world TV premiere" on the competitor's premiere night. Either

the special or movie should bridge the newcomer's start time. If there is sufficient lead time and program inventory permits, a series of extraordinary events and programming can be placed in the time period for weeks leading up to the competition's premiere. The idea is to build a viewing habit so binding that a viewer will not be tempted to seek programming elsewhere.

Blunting requires vigilance and imagination. No programmer should supinely "cave" against the premiere of an opponent's show, especially one that occupies a key position in the schedule. Obviously, no company has the resources to attempt to blunt every competitive move. But if there is a lot riding on the outcome of the new show's launch, every effort should be made to capture the viewer with greater attractions.

The recognized founder of the blunting technique in network television is Fred Silverman (Figure 9.5). When he became program chief of CBS in 1970, he instituted a policy of yearlong vigilance. Large sheets of paper were designed in which space was provided for the programs of the three networks, half hour by half hour, for all seven nights of the week. A sheet was maintained for every week. Each week, key CBS network strategists met to exchange information and update the charts. As soon as one of the other networks made a program announcement, the plotting began. Rarely was an ABC or NBC program launched that was not harassed by CBS diversions and enticements.

The system contributed significantly to CBS's No. 1 status for all 5 years of Silverman's program leadership. He then moved to ABC, where he used the technique to score more winning years. However, by the time he arrived at NBC, both his competitors were schooled in the process and the origi-

nator's advantage had vanished. After his stint at NBC ended, Silverman surveyed the programming landscape and was able to carve out an area all to himself with older-skewing shows such as "Matlock," "Diagnosis Murder," and the Perry Mason television movie franchise.

Late-night television is an extremely valuable resource for the networks. As author Ken Auletta observed, in the late 1980s NBC was getting 25% of its profits from late-night programming, making "Here's Johnny" (Carson) a welcome announcement.³ Over the years, late-night shows have remained a primary source of a network's income. In 1996, HBO produced a television movie, "The Late Shift," based on the book by *New York Times* media analyst Bill Carter, which dramatized how contentious the wars for late-night dominance can be. The failed attempt of ABC's Robert Iger to steal David Letterman from CBS in 2002 further illustrates how tough (and embarrassing) the public late-night blunting wars can be. In 2004, NBC sought to maintain the late-night dominance by securing the services of Jay Leno for five additional years and by naming his successor, Conan O'Brien, thus avoiding another possible contentious battle over the late shift.

Blunting strategies can sometimes end up hurting both parties, as happened during the 2001–2002 season when CBS and NBC tried to blunt each other's reality programming. CBS brought out a special edition of "Big Brother 2" against the launch of NBC's "Lost." NBC countered by using a special edition of "Fear Factor" to hurt the premier of CBS's "The Amazing Race." This showdown ended in a ratings draw, all performing adequately. But, as media analyst Stacey Lynn Korner notes, competitive egos got in the way, hurting the networks and viewers alike.⁴

Gone are the days when the commercial networks could ignore any blunting attempts by cable when making scheduling decisions. In 2004, with cable in more than 60% of homes and HBO, in particular, in 30% of homes, cable can significantly affect commercial television. For example, when HBO powerhouse series "The Sopranos" and "Sex and the City" aired at 9:00 Sunday nights, the commercial networks were clearly affected by the HBO–cable factor. When the final episode of "Sex and the City" aired February 22, 2004, it drew some 10.6 million viewers, making it the second-most-watched show in its time slot, beaten only by ABC, which had 17.5 millions viewers for the premier of the new and improved "Super Millionaire" with Regis Philbin again hosting. Indeed, ABC won the households race, but HBO narrowly beat ABC in the key 18- to 49-year-old demographic. All this with HBO in only 30% of U.S. homes.⁵

Cable and commercial networks frequently clash over blunting. For example, in 2002, NBC scheduled its movie about Matthew Shepard, the gay college student who was beaten and left to die by two young men high on crystal methamphetamine in Laramie, Wyoming, in 1998. The same night, HBO was premiering its movie about Shepard, "The Laramie Project," based on the play by Moises Kaufman. In response, HBO moved up the airing of its movie by a week, with both sides accusing each other of foul play and each proclaiming innocence about the scheduling plans of the other.

Interestingly, when MTV aired its version of the Matthew Shepard story a year before the HBO–NBC showdown, an NBC executive reportedly told his staff that the ratings effect of an MTV cable movie were inconsequential to NBC and could not be considered serious competition. But with commer-

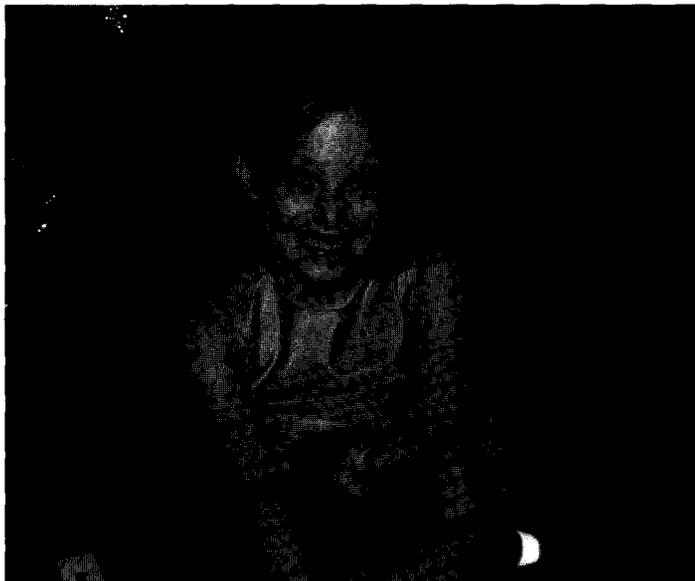


Figure 9.6
Steven Spielberg's Emmy-winning, highly rated limited series, "Taken," starring Dakota Fanning, demonstrated cable's growing stronghold on longform programming. (Courtesy the Academy of Television Arts & Sciences.)

cial television on the decline and cable programming on the rise, it is no longer possible for the commercial networks to ignore the blunting possibilities of the cable channels, particularly when cable airs viewer-friendly **limited series** (Figure 9.6).

CBS 1991 Monday Night Schedule

| Time | Program |
|------------------|---------------------|
| 8:00–8:30 P.M. | "Evening Shade" |
| 8:30–9:00 P.M. | "Major Dad" |
| 9:00–9:30 P.M. | "Murphy Brown" |
| 9:30–10:00 P.M. | "Designing Women" |
| 10:00–11:00 P.M. | "Northern Exposure" |

CBS 2003 Monday Night Schedule

| Time | Program |
|------------------|---------------------------|
| 8:00–8:30 P.M. | "Yes, Dear" |
| 8:30–9:00 P.M. | "Still Standing" |
| 9:00–9:30 P.M. | "Everybody Loves Raymond" |
| 9:30–10:00 P.M. | "Two and a Half Men" |
| 10:00–11:00 P.M. | "CSI: Miami" |

Figure 9.7
The CBS 1991 and 2003 Monday night schedule shows how programs can be stacked.

Stacking

Programmers attempt to develop an audience flow by assembling programs of similar appeal to sweep the viewer from one time period to the next, as PBS does by **stacking** three contiguous cooking shows on Saturday afternoons. A classic example of the stacking strategy was CBS's 1991 Monday night schedule of four sitcoms capped by a humorous, easy-to-take hour. The lineup dominated through the year and on several occasions was victorious in every half hour. In 2003, CBS similarly attempted to stack its programs with four sitcoms and an edgier 10:00 P.M. show, a spin off of its No. 1 hit, "CSI" (Figure 9.7).

Before embarking on such a stacking strategy, a programmer should carefully evaluate two considerations: Is there a powerful show to begin the schedule, and is there a weak link in the chain? Without a strong leadoff program, the lineup will be unable to develop the momentum necessary to start the audience flow. This flow is essential for stacking to work as a scheduling strategy. If a competitor takes a commanding lead at the beginning of the race, it will be difficult for the "stacked" lineup to gain pass-along benefits. Similarly, if there is an especially weak program in the string, viewers will drift to other offerings and the flow will be interrupted. If there is some doubt about the appeal of one of the shows, programmers would be well advised to place it at the end of the lineup.

Stacking to maintain audience flow is a standard procedure in virtually every daypart. In weekly daytime programming, the traditional strategy is to schedule games or other nonserial forms in the morning and serials in the afternoon. For decades, the networks have presented an uninterrupted string of animated shows on Saturday mornings to reach the 1- to

12-year-old audience. Research indicates that the youngest children watch the earliest shows, and, as the morning moves along, the audience tends to get older. In theory, programmers select the order of the cartoons to reflect this development, although how they determine an advancing intellectual content in these programs remains a mystery.

Stunting

Sometimes programs must take extraordinary measures to maintain their audience levels. The competition might be picking up momentum, a series of preemptions might have caused a loss of viewing habit, or a big sweeps week performance might be required to obtain a contract renewal. Whatever the reason, there are occasions when a show needs a major injection of audience appeal. As a short-term solution, programmers frequently resort to **stunting**, the insertion of entertainment elements not normally associated with the series to obtain a ratings spike.

One of the most popular ploys is to construct an episode around a movie personality, athlete, or a celebrity whose recent activities commanded national attention, such as having Elizabeth Taylor visit "General Hospital" in 1981. The appearance of these "names" provides powerful promotional opportunities and allows the program to exploit the public's curiosity about prominent figures.

Another traditional device is the development of a **multiparter** filled with cliffhangers. Story lines usually completed in one showing are extended to two or more episodes because "they're just too big, too important to be told in their usual length." Presumably viewers will be so gripped by the start of the story that they wouldn't dare miss the remaining episodes. Needless to say, the beginning must be strong or

there could be a ratings disaster paving the way to the conclusion, as was the case in 2004 at ABC with Stephen King's multiparter, "Kingdom Hospital," which began with respectable numbers but dropped 45% in its second airing.

In soaps and in prime time, weddings are often the stunt of choice. Conventional programming wisdom maintains a wedding episode can significantly boost the ratings of a show—thus the heavily promoted wedding of Phoebe in the final season of "Friends."

In the closing minutes of the last original episode of "Dallas" during the 1979–1980 season, J.R. Ewing, the power-mad, unscrupulous oil magnate, was shot by an unknown assailant and rushed to the hospital. This shooting was one of the biggest television stunts ever. Throughout the summer and into the first 2 months of the following season, viewers around the world speculated about "Who shot J.R.?" On November 21, 1980, the identity of the mysterious attacker was revealed to an estimated worldwide audience of more than 300 million. In the United States, more people viewed "Dallas" that evening than voted in the presidential election a few weeks earlier. It is still TV's second-most-watched episode, topped only by the 1983 finale of "M*A*S*H."

Reality shows promise twists and surprises (Fox's "Joe Millionaire," for example, was not really a millionaire), but it should be remembered that stunts cannot be overused (the next edition of "Joe Millionaire," the international version, essentially duplicated the original and failed). Stunts cannot make up for weak programming. No audience can be hyped indefinitely, and stunts can be costly. Although programmers often clamor for stunt casting and stunt plot twists to boost ratings during sweeps, it must be remembered that stunting cannot do it all. To be most effective,

Figure 9.8
Crossing “Buffy the Vampire Slayer” (a) into “Angel” (b) was designed to boost the ratings for “Angel.” (Globe Photos, Inc.)

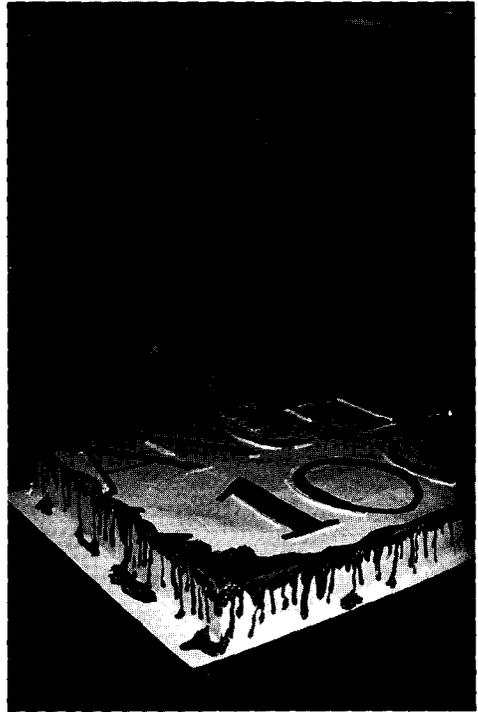


(a)

stunting should be seen as a short-term device.

One downside of stunting should be cited. To accommodate the stunt, producers frequently have to modify the basic idea of the show. A story line that plays up the special appeals of a celebrity guest must necessarily shift the focus from the core ensemble, which is why some producers, such as Dick Wolf, creator of the “Law & Order” franchise, do not engage in stunt casting.

When Pat Mitchell became PBS president and CEO in 2000, she saw the need for PBS to compete more aggressively. This was necessitated partly by the constant pressure PBS faces that its financial base will be severed. Although many individuals, such as Brian Lowry of *Daily Variety* and Chellie Pingree, president of Common Cause, a citizens’ organization of more than 250,000 people who support responsible broadcasting, favor keeping PBS healthy and solvent, the financial pressures are real. To stay vibrant, PBS stations create their own stunts, particularly when they are



(b)

trying to raise money from viewers during pledge weeks.

Crossprogramming

Crossprogramming is the interconnection of two shows for mutual benefit. In its most sophisticated form, a story is started on one program and is completed on another. It can be highly productive, but it requires an unusual combination of circumstances.

Upon her return to “ER” after her 5-year hiatus from the show, Sherry Stringfield crossed from “ER” to “Third Watch,” another John Wells production. Similarly, David E. Kelley introduced a story line in “Ally McBeal” that concluded on “The Practice,” with cast members crossing from one Kelley show to the next.

Other examples of crossprogramming occurred when a heart transplant started out on “Homicide” and ended up on “Chicago Hope” and when “Buffy the Vampire Slayer” crossed over to boost the ratings of debuting companion show “Angel” (Figure 9.8).

Elaborate crossovers require substantial advance planning, compatible formats, the good will of all, and, most often, a common production company. Such combinations are rare, which accounts for the infrequent use of elaborate crossprogramming. But when it can be used, it is a powerful programming tool.

Less ambitious versions, which produce more modest results, can also be developed. Appearances by stars on each other's programs and references on one program to events on another are two of the more familiar usages. This harkens back to the early days of radio when Gracie Allen, the comedienne of "Burns and Allen," visited numerous other radio shows looking for her brother.

Crossprogramming works because the avid viewers of the first show can be added to the core audience of the second, thereby producing incremental ratings, primarily for the latter. Obviously, the opening episode should be scheduled on the more popular of the two shows. It is easy to see how this maneuvering can cause resentment among the staff and cast of the higher-rated program. "The production company is just using us to beef up the numbers of the other program," is an opinion a programmer should be braced to hear. It calls for some nimble diplomacy, but the results can make it worthwhile.

Theming

Grouping programs with similar themes is big in syndication, where movies are often combined into theme weeks ("Elvis Week," "Monster Week," or "Romance in the Afternoon Week"), but this scheduling strategy also fre-

quently occurs in commercial television and cable.

For example, in 2004, ABC made a concerted effort to have Oscar-related programming before the Oscar telecast on February 29. As Judith Tukich, ABC director of synergy and special projects, observed, "Oscar plotlines are featured in ABC's comedy lineup."⁶

"I'm With Her" had a five-episode story line with Teri Polo, the star of the show, an actress whose boyfriend is a schoolteacher, nominated for an Academy Award. Polo worried about what to wear to the Oscars, how to avoid the wrath of Joan Rivers on the red carpet, and how to deal with her pushy mother, played by Cybil Shepard, who arrived unpredictably, expecting to be given a ticket to the awards ceremony. ABC soaps featured Oscar story lines; "Good Morning America" and "The View" focused on the Oscars.

Cable has clearly embraced the advantages of **theming**. ESPN, part of the Disney family like ABC, discussed the Oscar nominations on its morning show, "Cold Pizza." The Disney Channel also sponsored Oscar-related events, as did A&E and Lifetime.⁷

The Outdoor Channel, which in 2004 programmed to a niche audience of some 26 million outdoor enthusiasts ("real outdoors for real people with nothing too extreme, too expensive or unsafe"), had three theme nights on its schedule: On Monday nights, a 4-hour block of half-hour shows on fishing; on Tuesday nights, a 4-hour block of half-hour shows on hunting; and on Wednesday nights, a 4-hour block of half-hour shows relating to horsepower. According to Wade Sherman, the senior vice president of programming at the Outdoor Channel, this scheduling strategy greatly increased audience flow, enabling the



Figure 9.9
The Outdoor Channel uses theming to build upon its audience base. (Courtesy the Outdoor Channel.)

Figure 9.10
PBS's perennial "Sesame Street" makes up a portion of its children's television programming stack. (Courtesy Children's Television Workshop.)

Outdoor Channel to increase its subscription base (Figure 9.9).

Stripping

Another strategy used by local stations involves **stripping**—placing the same show in the same time period every weekday and sometimes even on Saturday and Sunday. It is done partly for economic prudence and partly because it is a sound audience strategy. For example, PBS uses stripping effectively with children's programs that almost always appear at the same time every day (Figure 9.10). As you saw earlier, stations that buy a syndicated package of off-network shows have a fixed period



within which the agreed-upon number of showings must be run. Usually, the only way to meet this requirement is to schedule the series every day, Monday through Friday.

Placing a show in a predictable time and place enables viewers who are fans of the program to know exactly where and when they can find it. Nothing irritates and frustrates a viewer more than a lengthy search to locate the air time of a favorite series. Even if it were possible for a station to meet its pay-or-play obligations on several series by alternating them night after night, it would not be sensible scheduling. Fans of one show might not like the other, and they could quickly get out of the habit of watching at that time.

Changing a Show's Time Slot

Some shows, such as "Chicago Hope" described previously, *need* a time change, and some shows, such as "Everybody Loves Raymond," can survive being bumped around the dial until they land in the perfect spot. Not all shows, however, benefit from a schedule change.

With so many choices available, the audience does not need to be confused about when a show is airing. There are specials, **preemptions**, and sweeps altercations, and few time slots, apart from "I Love Lucy" or "ER," remain unchanged. But a time slot change can damage a show, taking the wind out of its sails and halting momentum.

When Fox's "King of the Hill" was moved in its second season (1998) to Tuesday nights from its previous Sunday night berth, it struggled mightily until it was brought back to Sunday nights, where it was given a chance to grow and develop a following.

Similarly, Fox's frequent schedule changes and periods of hiatus for the

cult favorite “Family Guy” did not help the show get the big ratings, much to the chagrin of loyal fans who subsequently enjoyed the show on record-selling DVDs and on the Cartoon Network’s “Adult Swim.” The loyalty of these passionate fans paid off as seven new episodes of the show were created in 2004. The cult following kept the show alive, despite the initial on-and-off scheduling.

When ABC decided to switch “The Practice” from its usual Sunday night time slot at 10:00 to Monday nights at 9:00 during the 2002–2003 season, the move failed in several ways. Placed between “Veritas: The Quest” and “Miracles,” ostensibly to function as a tent-pole, the Emmy Award-winning “The Practice” fell to fourth in its time slot. In addition, creator David E. Kelley was angered by the time slot switch, accusing ABC of trying to sabotage the show in its seventh season. Kelley was extremely vocal about his displeasure, hurting the all-important ABC/Kelley creative relationship. Ultimately, the show returned to its Sunday time slot, where in the 2003–2004 season it underwent a major change, which we will cover in a subsequent chapter.

Commercial networks are in the habit of making constant scheduling changes. PBS, on the other hand, for many years kept the same schedule for its audience of approximately 100 million people. PBS President Pat Mitchell initiated a pilot program with seven major PBS stations to experiment with different schedules to revitalize the PBS lineup.

Aware that PBS cannot afford to be viewed as stodgy, Mitchell sought to make changes. She moved “Masterpiece Theatre” from Sunday nights, although it was subsequently moved back. Keen on crosspromoting, she sought to establish a closer connection between PBS and NPR by bringing in noted NPR

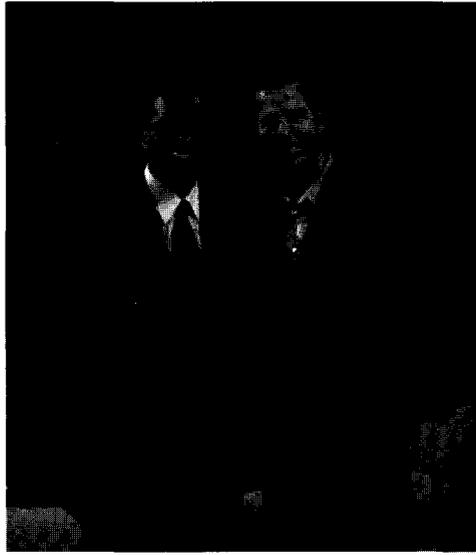


Figure 9.11
Tavis Smiley, pictured here with Neal Kendall, the executive producer of his show, made a successful transition from NPR to PBS. (Courtesy The Smiley Group.)

commentator Bill Moyers with “Now with Bill Moyers” in 2002. NPR’s first African-American talk show host, Tavis Smiley, also became PBS’s African-American vanguard in 2004, with his eponymous show (Figure 9.11).

Overexposure

When networks have a hit, the tendency is to capitalize on that show’s success by scheduling it too often or by trying to schedule close duplicates too quickly. For example, when ABC had its monster hit, “Who Wants to Be a Millionaire,” there was a strong temptation to exploit the show, particularly because it was a relative bargain to produce. ABC scheduled the show a staggering four times a week in 2001, eventually killing the show through overexposure. When ABC brought back a bigger “Super Millionaire” with a top prize of \$10 million in February 2004, the network scheduled it five nights in a row but only for one week during the February sweeps and a second week during the May sweeps, seemingly avoiding the overexposure mistakes of the past.

When Fox had its monster hit, “American Idol,” it tried to duplicate

Figure 9.12
“I Love Lucy,”
 starring Lucille
 Ball, pioneered the
 use of film for
 weekly television
 series. The
 technique enabled
 the episodes to be
 rerun with high
 quality. The
 programs are still
 syndicated today,
 some 50 years after
 they were first
 produced.
 (Courtesy the
 Academy of
 Television Arts &
 Sciences.)



the success with “American Juniors” in the summer of 2003. Too similar? Too soon? Whatever the reasons, this “Idol” imitation did not achieve the success of its predecessor, losing large chunks of its audience week by week.⁸

Imitations can succeed, for example, NBC’s “For Love or Money II” or ABC’s “The Bachelorette,” modeled after “The Bachelor,” but overexposure can take away a show’s unique or special quality. Too many repeat showings, called **encores**, can lessen viewer interest. WB calls its repeats of shows during the same week an **easy view** option, and in 2004, NBC presented its hit show “The Apprentice” twice in the same week, but overexposure is a risky business. The public quickly tires when offered too much of a good thing.

Rerunning and Repurposing

In the early days of television, few programs were rerun—for technical reasons. Videotape had not been invented, and film was considered much

too expensive for this fledgling medium. Most programs were aired live—mistakes and all. A process called **kinescope recording** was developed so that some programs could be saved or run on the West Coast at the same “clock hours” as their East Coast origination. But these “kines,” which were films made off a TV monitor, were of poor quality.

From their beginnings in the early 1950s, Lucille Ball and Desi Arnez filmed “I Love Lucy,” and everyone thought they were a little crazy—until the foreign market opened up (Figure 9.12). Then Lucy and Desi began raking in the money from selling their shows to other countries, and a few fellow producers decided to follow suit. It was not long before American broadcasting realized it could play these films, too. Thus was born the rerun.

A basic annual pattern of program scheduling set in. Programs were introduced in the fall, ended their season in mid-spring, went into reruns for the summer, and emerged with new product the following fall. This came about through a combination of reality, surmise, social habits, and economics.

The key reality, as explained previously, was the drop-off in viewing over the summer months. From June through August, daylight remains well into the evening. People stay outside longer, and (according to conventional wisdom) the TV set often stands dark and unattended. Also, during the summer a substantial percentage of viewers are on vacation and are unavailable for, or uninterested in, watching TV. Through the decades a vociferous executive minority has claimed that this assessment is largely an incorrect surmise, grown into a mythic delusion. Defenders of the traditional cycle are quick to point out two important reasons for the summer hiatus—cast and staff demand a rest, and networks need

the revenue from reruns, as described in the section on introducing a show in a quiet time.

When a repeat of an episode is scheduled, the cost of payments to performers and other guild members (\$50,000–\$75,000) is the only production expense. Although the value of the commercials is somewhat reduced because of the audience falloff in the summer and the diminished attraction of seeing an episode twice in the same season, the revenue on a reasonably popular program is more than enough to offset costs. Despite complaints of viewers and the frustration of some program and production executives, an annual cycle that incorporates a rerun of virtually every original episode remains a strong possibility. In the summer of 2004 CBS, for example, did very well with reruns of its successful shows.

It is true that a weekly series is physically exhausting for cast and staff. The hours are long, the pressure relentless, and the opportunity to unwind almost nonexistent. A break is necessary so that they do not kill themselves, or each other. Scoffers downplay the fatigue factor and point to the round-the-calendar schedules of daytime serials that have been produced without loss of life or audience over 4 decades. Even NBC's deceased programming genius, Brandon Tartikoff, stated: "If you can make 265 episodes each year of 'Days of Our Lives,' I've got to believe you can make 40 to 45 episodes of 'Knots Landing'" (Figure 9.13).

As explained in Chapter 2, repurposing, the airing of a show on a different outlet shortly after its initial airing, became a significant scheduling tool, particularly with the proliferation of mergers that created a host of sister companies ready, willing, and able to repurpose. Thus, a show that airs on a Tuesday night on NBC can be repur-

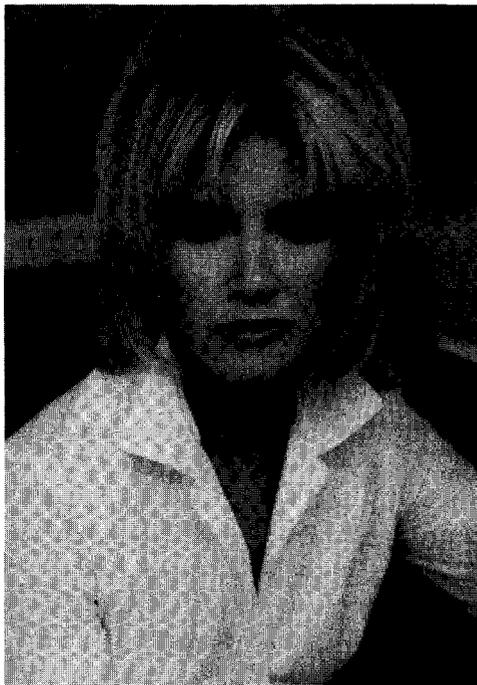


Figure 9.13

For many years, Donna Mills starred in the nighttime soap "Knots Landing," where she delivered the famous line, "Let the second Mrs. Ewing give the third Mrs. Ewing some advice. The first Mrs. Ewing . . . doesn't go away." (Courtesy Donna Mills.)

posed on a Thursday night on Bravo or vice versa. PBS even engages in repurposing with the Latino drama "American Family" by licensing a secondary run to Telemundo.

Repurposing enables companies to get much more bang for their buck from individual episodes. It also enables different audiences to experience the same show. A niche audience here, a mainstream audience there: It all adds up to the benefit of a show's exposure.

Boosting the Audience in Sweep Periods

Although every day in television is important, some are more important than others. Four times a year for 30-day periods (February, May, July, and November), Nielsen conducts special **sweeps** of audience viewing habits in every market in the country. Although many programmers decry sweeps periods as outdated mechanisms, they are unlikely to go away. Sweeps moni-

toring is vital to the economic health of each station. This statistical data forms the basis of the advertising rates until the results of the next sweep are available. Programmers are under great pressure to build the highest possible ratings for each time period.

For many years, event miniseries delivered heavenly ratings during sweeps. An actor such as Richard Chamberlin was *the* king of sweeps. More recently, pop star Michael Jackson was the crowned king of sweeps programming. *Anything* dealing with Michael Jackson was viewed as surefire ratings gold. Finding a sweeps-worthy event such as the 200th episode of "ER" or the 300th episode of "Law & Order" weighs heavily on the minds of all programming executives. No one wants the affiliates to complain about sweeps programming that did not allow them to command viable advertising rates. Local news shows turn to exposing restaurants where cockroaches abound.

During the February 2004 sweeps, ABC's "Super Millionaire" hit ratings pay dirt on the first night, although it dropped afterward, not giving ABC the much-needed boost for which it had undoubtedly hoped.

It is getting harder to know what will deliver the numbers during sweeps, but the search continues unabashedly. Some turn to specials (awards shows tend to be fairly reliable bullets); others rely on highly rated regular programming, with just a few added weddings, pregnancies, same-sex kisses, and celebrity sightings.

It is proper during sweep periods for stations and networks to employ as many of the audience-building techniques described in this chapter as possible. The battle for viewers (and therefore dollars) is crucial, and spiking devices are a legitimate part of the competitive system.

Patience

Although many of the shows that became part of television history were slow starters that needed time to develop and to nurture a word-of-mouth campaign, patience has been in short supply in recent years. If a show does not connect quickly, programmers find it increasingly difficult to wait it out, hoping to prove that a programmer's instinct was on the money despite a slow start. The competition is too strong and the stakes are too high for top management, concerned with the bottom line, to wait "too long" for a turnaround. With mergers, companies are often run by individuals that are not primarily broadcasters who understand that some shows take time to build; their obligation is to the stockholders, and they do not have the patience or confidence to stay with a show until it finds its audience.

Slow starters such as the original "Dick Van Dyke Show," "Cheers," "Barney Miller," "Hill Street Blues," and "Everybody Loves Raymond" need time. Everyone agrees in theory that patience is needed when it comes to scheduling programming, everyone agrees pressure for the early dismissal of a show should be resisted, and everyone agrees that programmers will obtain a first look at a creator's next project if the current project is given a chance to develop. Still, it is hard for programmers and their bosses to avoid moving quickly if a show performs poorly at the start.

In the 2002–2003 season, Fox canceled its David E. Kelley series, "Girls Club," about women lawyers in San Francisco, after only two airings. In 2003–2004, CBS canceled Kelley's "The Brotherhood of Poland, New Hampshire," about three brothers, after four outings. Also in the 2003–2004 season,

NBC canceled “Coupling,” the highly publicized British import seen as a possible replacement for “Friends,” after only four airings. That same season, Fox canceled “Skin,” Jerry Bruckheimer’s look at the world of pornography, after three airings. These were only a few of the many series decapitated that season (Figure 9.14).

If you do not succeed right away in commercial television, chances are that the virtue of patience will not come to your show’s rescue.

Cable, on the other hand, tends to be more patient. Having two primary sources of revenue—advertisers and subscribers—enables basic cable to hold off pressing the cancel button. A premium channel such as HBO can allow a show such as “Carnivale,” which was not embraced by either critics or viewers, to run its course, which probably would not have been the case on commercial TV. Had “Lucky” been on commercial TV instead of FX, it probably would have been pulled without finishing a full season.

| Series | Network Aired | No. Aired Episodes |
|---------------------------------|---------------|--------------------|
| “Skin” | Fox | 3 |
| “Coupling” | NBC | 4 |
| “Luis” | Fox | 4 |
| “The Brotherhood of Poland, NH” | CBS | 5 |
| “The Lyon’s Den” | NBC | 6 |
| “A Minute with Stan Hooper” | Fox | 6 |
| “Karen Cisco” | ABC | 7 |
| “Tarzan” | WB | 8 |
| “The Mulletts” | UPN | 10 |
| “Jake 2.0” | UPN | 12 |

In this chapter, we examined the various scheduling strategies for television programming. In Chapter 10, you will learn about specific differences between scheduling for radio and scheduling for the Internet.

Figure 9.14
During the 2003–2004 season, several shows on commercial television were pulled before finishing a full season.

EXERCISES

1. Pick a night and a commercial network and examine that night’s schedule. What changes would you make and why?
2. Pick a cable network; identify that network’s targeted niche audience. What changes would you make in the schedule to strengthen that network’s appeal?
3. What specific show that has been canceled do you think would have eventually found an audience if it had been allowed to grow?
4. What would you do to boost sweeps awareness for a particular show?

5. Describe a crossprogramming idea between two shows that you think would increase the ratings of both shows.
6. What would you do to energize PBS’s schedule, both in children’s and in prime-time programming?
7. Do you agree or disagree with Alan Wurtzel that 50% of households that will ever watch a program get hooked by one of the first two episodes? Why? Do you have a personal experience that supports or contradicts this position?

Programming for TV, Radio, and the Internet

Strategy, Development, and Evaluation

Philippe Perebinosoff
California State University, Fullerton

Brian Gross
EF Education, Jakarta, Indonesia

Lynne S. Gross
California State University, Fullerton



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