

At The NewFronts, It's More About The Buzz Than The Buy

DIGITAL THOUGHT LEADERSHIP

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With another NewFronts upon us, there are, as always, a number of key trends, themes and questions that have emerged.

Among those that have captured my interest:

The changing lineup, including Disney and ESPN skipping this year's NewFronts as they integrate all Walt Disney teams, along with Fox-acquired Fox brands 21st Century Fox, FX and National Geographic. This new approach of massive content brands will be pitched in the broadcast upfront.

The emergence of Facebook, although not at the event, but in our conference rooms, selling Facebook Watch as a potential upfront video option via Facebook showcases.

The rise of brand safety as an urgent concern affecting all advertisers and media platforms – something that will surely be top of mind among NewFronts attendees.

The intensifying chase of Gen Z, with destinations like YouTube and Instagram continuing to attract a younger, more engaged audience.

Another issue sure to be on everyone's mind this time around has to do with the ever-shrinking, ever-aging audience for traditional television and its impact on the digital media marketplace – specifically, the opportunities it presents for digital advertising.

I am asked all the time: What can digital platforms do to capture the multibillion-dollar investment traditionally earmarked for the network upfronts?

My answer: We should not focus so much on a shift in those dollars – linear TV is not dead. But we should concentrate on looking at video investments more holistically, with linear TV spend as an important and still considerable slice of that pie.

Despite the well-publicized issues of broadcast and cable TV and the dramatic expansion of programming from OTT and streaming players like Netflix, Amazon and Hulu, the simple truth is that those making media investment decisions are not looking to replace linear television. Rather, we aim to design video strategies that encompass all ad-supported channels that serve brands' needs.

To that point, potential upfront participation this year of the largest social media brand on the planet – which has raised eyebrows among some players, leading one to ask in a recent column, "Who invited Facebook to the NewFronts?" – will no doubt be a consideration in many, if not most, brands' video plans.

I say, let's embrace that – not try to run from it.

We need only to insist that all platforms, including Facebook and the TV networks, meet a baseline of criteria, which include:

- Unique offerings, customization and best-in-market data and research
- Strong content opportunities that dovetail with brands' insights and strategies
- Performance that moves the needle with marketers' business and their KPIs, including sales targets, incremental reach and a lift in attitudinal metrics

Our focus needs to be on growing desirable audiences and creating ways to engage them across an array of media choices, something presenters at this year's NewFronts will be acutely aware of and, I expect, are bound to reinforce.

For example, brand integrations continue to be a way marketers can have a powerful impact beyond the 30- (or six-, or three-) second spot, and they are sure to be highlighted during the event. Another is long-form content. In 2018, we studied audience behavior with programming that ran 10 minutes or longer and discovered that longer content was rewarded with more engaged viewers, greater watch time and double the completion rate of shorter programs.

Any innovation that manages to attract and engage the viewer, faced with an ever-growing menu of programming options, will have an edge among advertisers, so look for plenty of launches, including a host of premium YouTube channels and programming from social platforms.

It is such innovation, after all, that is at the very heart of the NewFronts.

While some wheeling and dealing may happen, the event has never really been akin to the upfront's annual unveiling of fall lineups and kickoff of negotiations between the networks and advertisers, which is why the idea of digitally siphoning dollars from the upfronts is not the point.

Rather, digital media is a year-round transaction, and the NewFronts are an opportunity to bring together brands, agencies and digital content producers to learn about the biggest

and best options today for advertisers. The NewFronts are about innovation, imagination and the multiplicity of marketing opportunities at a time when the most coveted audiences continue to flock to digital.

The NewFronts are more about the buzz than the buy. And that's the way it should be.

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