

SPONSORSHIP AND THE FRAGMENTING MEDIA

by Gail S. Bower

Changes in the media landscape signal an interesting opportunity for non-profit organizations and other properties with high-value corporate sponsorship programs.

If you grew up in the 1960s and 1970s, you remember the days when we had three channels—ABC, CBS, and NBC—plus PBS and, depending on where you lived, a handful of independents to choose from for our television viewing habits. According to Dr. Barry Vacker, professor of media studies at Temple University, the three networks captured over 95 percent of the viewing audience.

Changing Viewing Patterns

When HBO went on the air in the mid-1970s, viewing patterns began to change. Soon after, cable choices included CNN, MTV, ESPN, and a host of other networks. By the 1990s, Vacker said, these cable networks fragmented viewer audiences, and the Big Three (ABC, CBS, NBC) captured about 60 percent of the electronic visual media. With cable, viewers had 20 to 30 television programming options. According to Nielson Media Research, by 1989, cable reached more than 48 million television households, or 54 percent of US households.

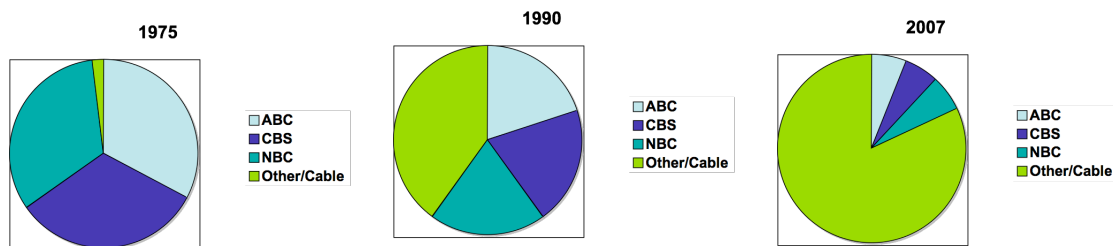
“In the 1960s and early 1970s, an average network share was 33,” said Vacker. “In the 1990s, *Seinfeld* was one of the top-rated shows with a 20 rating. If a show had had a 20 share in the 1960s and early 1970s, it likely would have been the kiss of death after one season.”

(A rating point is 1% of all the estimated television households, as reported by Nielson Television Ratings. Each August that estimate is updated, and as of September 2006, Nielson projected 110.2 million television households in the US. One percent, or one point, is 1,102,000 households. Shares are the percentage of viewers tuned into a particular program.)

TV Today

Today there are 200 to 300 channels, and the Big Three represent only 15 to 20 percent of the viewing market. If you add in options available on the internet and video rentals, we now have millions of electronic viewing choices.

“With the proliferation available on TV, people narrow their choices to only eight to 15 channels that they view on a regular basis,” Vacker said. “Of course viewers are watching neither at the same time nor the same eight to 15 channels, unlike the time prior to HBO, when everyone watched the same three.”



This proliferation of electronic visual media will continue for the foreseeable future, further fragmenting audiences.

“Since cable and the internet are converging, the ultimate destination is that everyone has his or her own personal TV networks,” said Vacker, “streaming in and out of our homes, non-stop, 24/7. All you have to do is imagine MySpace converging with YouTube.”

Interestingly the top viewed video at YouTube.com is the *Evolution of Dance* (<http://youtube.com/watch?v=dMH0bHeiRNq>), watched by more than 44 million people around the world. *New York Times* writer Virginia Heffernan speculates in her blog, *Screens*, that Asian audiences, high users of cell phones and their screens, helped increase the numbers (<http://screens.blogs.nytimes.com/2006/10/17/the-breakthrough-of-that-dance-video-the-future-of-youtube-and-the-wisdom-of-google/>), especially since this video, with no words, simply music and dancing, transcends language.

The Opportunity for Non-Profits and Other Properties

The burgeoning media environment makes consumer advertising decision-making quite a challenging and complex process for corporations on national, regional, and local levels. A previous television buy on the three networks would have captured 60 to 98 percent of a market up until the 1990s. Now that same buy might only reach 15 to 20 percent of a market.

At the same time, as a culture, we are inundated with a barrage of commercial messages every day. Younger generations take advantage of social networks created through the internet and depend less on traditional media and more on new media, like cell phones, which alters their exposure to commercial messages, compared with older generations.

Marketers, therefore, must look for new and clever ways to work in this new media environment, characterized by being network-driven vs. linear in structure. Marketing-driven corporate sponsorship programs that are fully integrated and, above all, experiential are an excellent means to delivering messages with impact and meaning to niche audiences.

Your Network

Non-profit causes and properties, such as festivals and annual events or conferences, represent a link in the network, each with its own network that marketers may tap into. Your sponsorship program allows marketers to connect with audiences vetted and unified by a common interest or passion. A literacy or environmental organization, for example, each has a community linked by shared values or concerns.

If crafted with consideration for this important bond, the corporate sponsorship tie implies support, even endorsement, from the property or non-profit, which may carry weight for audiences. In addition, sponsorship of a property or non-profit cause associates a marketer with a lifestyle choice in a setting or environment in which audiences may be less resistant to receiving a commercial message. But that message must be carefully delivered, creatively and with subtlety.

Four Steps To Help Prepare Your Organization

Here are four steps you can take to be sure you're prepared to meet corporate—and your own—needs in sponsorship:

- Invest in demographic and psychographic research so that you understand as much as you can about your market. This data will be valuable information to guide you in your discussions with prospective sponsors.
- Have a clear picture of your own marketing objectives to guide you in creating and negotiating sponsorship programs that have high marketing potential for your organization or property.
- Understand all the ways your organization or property may integrate sponsors' messages into your program. How do you connect with your own network? How can you create subtle inroads into that network for marketers?
- Integration is key. Provide nuanced layers of affiliation with your audiences. Make sure that the experiential component you offer each of your sponsors respects the important relationship you have with your audiences.

If this article gets you thinking about sponsorship and the value you offer potential corporate sponsors in new ways, let me know. If you're already incorporating sponsorship into your network in creative ways, I'd love to hear what you're doing. Email me at Gail@GailBower.com and share your ideas.

(1016 words)

Gail Bower, President, Bower & Co. Consulting LLC, specializes in raising the visibility, revenue, and impact of non-profit organizations. She's a professional consultant, author, and speaker, with 20 years of experience managing some of the country's most important events, festivals and sponsorships. (*Business Philadelphia* named Gail among the "100 People to Watch" in 1993.) Launched in Philadelphia in 1987, today Bower & Co. provides marketing and business development counsel and implements marketing programs. For more information, visit GailBower.com or contact her at 1-866/36-BOWER (1-866-362-6937).

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