

Fine tuning the Fox stations

Programing of former Metromedia outlets reshaped to take advantage of first-run programing, joint ventures

It's been nine months since Rupert Murdoch acquired the Metromedia station group, now known as Fox Television Stations, and while some changes have been made, in many dayparts the stations have retained (with some refinements) the program forms put in place by Metromedia. As a rule, the stations [WNYW New York, KTTV Los Angeles, WFLD-TV Chicago, WTTG Washington, KRIV-TV Houston and KDAF-TV Dallas) provide children's programing in the morning and the afternoon, comedies in early fringe and a mix of local, news and various syndicated programs in the daytime schedule. The big

issue now faced by the group is how the local and syndicated product will mesh with the programs supplied by Fox Broadcasting Co.

According to David Simon, vice president, programing, Fox Television Stations, the group is "constantly" grappling with that issue. Simon also said last week that with stations in seven of the top 10 markets, the Fox group is in a "good position" to launch first-run projects, and will continue to explore joint ventures. He also said the stations would produce more programing locally, with an eye toward distributing local efforts group-wide, or possibly syndicate them. One example is a new program being produced by WNYW, *Made In New York*, which will debut Dec. 8 from noon to 1 p.m., replacing the public affairs show, *Midday with*

Bill Boggs. The new show will be a talk/variety program hosted by the station's former *PM Magazine* hosts, Matt Lauer and Jill Rappaport. It will be live and is described as being "totally experimental." But if it is well received by audiences, Simon confirmed, it may be distributed to the entire station group.

"The future for our stations," Simon said, "is not kids and early fringe," which have been and continue to be the bread and butter program components for many independents. Those two elements will continue to be important elements of the Fox group, said Simon. "We intend to broaden our base with new and better programing," he said, indicating that in part, that's where the FBC programing will come into play. But there are other key sources of programing the group has tapped for group-wide exhibition deals, including two joint program ventures. Many of those efforts were launched when the stations were under the Metromedia banner, such as *Small Wonder*, a joint venture with Taft, Gannett, Storer and Hearst. Fox has since assumed Metromedia's role. Metromedia also forged a number of group deals for first-run animated programs including *Thundercats*, from Lorimar-Telepictures, and *He-Man and She-Ra*, from Group W Productions.

Fox has continued to show a thirst for joint ventures, evidenced by its participation in the Lor-Tel-produced *Value Television*, a home shopping program to bow next fall. Fox has also participated in additional group exhibition deals, including two for next season, Columbia's *The Real Ghostbusters* and *Duck Tales* from Buena Vista Television.

But there is a limit to the number of deals the group can do. Simon said that he is besieged with offers from suppliers of first-run animated material who want to do barter deals. "The market is so glutted with it," he said, "that we are really in danger of not controlling our own schedule." Simon said suppliers who expect a shot at group deals with the Fox stations must be flexible over time period and terms. "We intend to maintain control of our schedule and inventory," he said. "We see no magic to barter. We're just as inclined to pay cash for a program." Nevertheless, the station group is attractive to suppliers and Simon said he is involved in a lot of conversations about first-run program ventures.

Rupert Murdoch's acquisition of the stations has also opened opportunities for global programing projects. The first is the group's participation in a worldwide broadcast of the World Music Video Awards on Jan 10. Domestically, the awards will be broadcast by the seven Fox stations and a lineup put together by All American Television. Murdoch's Skychannel and Network



Syndication talk. A number of syndication programers surveyed the market landscape at a luncheon of the Boston/New England chapter of the National Academy of Television Arts and Sciences.

Columbia Pictures's Bob King called VCR's no threat to Columbia's "pay window" for films, because even "Raiders of the Lost Ark" 's 1.2-million cassette sales doesn't make much of a dent in the nation's 87 million TV households.

Embassy's Barry Thurston said the programer's biggest test is developing shows that will last for years. "We feel we have been program-driven, rather than deal-driven," he said, calling the latter motive a major industry problem.

King World's Sidney Cohen said King World plans to get into the network business, deliver shows to cable and acquire more product including feature film packages.

MTM's Joe Indelli said he tries to change the perception that all hour-long dramas are the same. "You have to get into the broadcaster's mind and try to solve his problems."

Paramount's Lucie Salhany said Paramount has backed away from buying television stations because prices are too high and profit margins are shrinking. She said it takes an extraordinary show to bump one distributed by a station's owner, and predicts that things will become tougher for ordinary shows as advertising dollars get harder to come by.

Sitting, from left: Indelli, president, MTM Distribution Group; Salhany, president, domestic and video programing, Paramount Pictures Television, and King, president, Columbia Pictures Television Domestic Distribution. Standing, from left: Thurston, president for syndication, Embassy Communications; Gerry Walsh, president and general manager, W.V.I-TV Boston, co-chairman of the event, and Cohen, president for domestic syndication, King World.