

for sky-high prices? Both sides point a finger at the other. "Some of these guys seem like kids in a candy store, and pretty soon they'll have more than they can digest," said John C. Ranck, executive vice president, station sales, Orbis Communications.



An illustration of what impact a new independent has on program prices in a market is provided by Chuck Alvey, program director at KPHO-TV Phoenix. Chris-Craft/United put KUTP-TV (ch. 45) on the air two weeks ago, the fourth independent in the 23d ADI. "Because of these new people in town, the pressure for program prices has gone up," said Alvey. And that, he added, has "definitely had an impact on the bottom line. In some cases we have to swallow—if we need the product badly enough. In other cases we are passing on product we would have tried."

Alvey cited the price of feature packages—rising at a rate equal to off-network sitcoms, according to many station programmers. A title in a package is "going crazy from the mid-teens to \$20,000 and up into the \$30,000-range," he said. "Prices have just about doubled."

Most independent operators report that programing costs are going up with double-digit increases while revenue is only increasing by single digits. It leaves no choice but to rethink programing decisions, said Gregg Miller, vice president of programing at Taft Broadcasting. "Stations are going to have to take a close look as to what a responsible decision is," Miller said. "It may be the best decision not to pay the freight for the most popular program in the market but to back away from it if the price is beyond reason."

The most critical area in short supply is sitcoms. Only one off-network sitcom was made available last fall—MCA-TV's *Gimme A Break*—and only one is set to premier this fall—Embassy's *Facts of Life*. In 1987, four sitcoms are scheduled to be released into syndication: *Cheers* (Paramount), *Family Ties* (Paramount), *Newhart* (Victory) and *Silver Spoons* (Embassy).

In comparison, four one-hour dramas are set for release in syndication in 1986 and five in 1987 on top of six one-hour shows that were made available last fall. Some major one-hour series are still unsold in major markets. In Los Angeles, for example, *Simon & Simon*, *Hill Street Blues*, *Knight Rider*, *Cagney & Lacey* and *Trapper John, M.D.*—some of which have been on the market for more than a year—remain uncleared. "I don't know who the hell is going to buy these things," said David Simon, program director at KTLA-TV, the station that paid the highest price for a one-hour series (\$120,000 per episode for *Magnum, P.I.*)

According to Dick Robertson, executive vice president at Lorimar-Telepictures, the shortage of sitcoms coming off the networks is "the only thing independents care about. It's that simple. These guys live and die on sitcoms."

The sitcom shortage is motivating producers and distributors to fill the void with first-run half-hours that, if successful, will hold out the potential for syndication in three to

four years. These projects, in fact, are commanding center stage at this season's programing marketplaces in the absence of any major first-run strip efforts on the scale of *Inday* or *America*. There will be 11 first-run sitcoms available for fall 1986—which, in some cases, affiliates will also be competing for. "The major development we've seen from the programing side are the successful once-a-week sitcoms," MMT's Shapiro observed. "I think this bodes well for the future."

Inspired by the successes of first-run sitcoms such as *Small Wonder*, *It's a Living*, *What's Happening Now* and *Too Close for Comfort* last season, an equal number of new first-run sitcoms will be joining those series this season. Among the contenders—most without major station clearances yet—are *Throb* (Worldvision), *9 to 5* (20th Century Fox Telecommunications), *Check It Out* (D. L. Taffner), *Gidget* (LBS Communications) and two unannounced projects from Lorimar-Telepictures: *Mama's Family* and *One Big Family*. Viacom also is expected to unveil a first-run sitcom at INTV.

(None of these first-run projects are yet firm. The resurrection of *Mama's Family* (NBC, 1983-84), for example, is reportedly contingent on being able to re-sign actress Vicki Lawrence for the lead role.)

The supply of off-net sitcoms will also get a boost in the near future when certain half-hours produced for cable networks such as superstation WTBS(TV) Atlanta and Showtime become available, some this year. These sitcoms include Paramount's *Brothers* and Selcom's *Washington* from Showtime, and Procter & Gamble's *Down to Earth* and *Safe at Home*, both from WTBS.

The shortage in sitcoms has resulted in a natural bidding-up of their prices. Serge Valle, vice president of Katz Communications' independent division, forecasts a "continued escalation" in the prices of half-hours in the coming years, especially with the syndication launch of *The Cosby Show* in 1987 by Viacom Enterprises for 1988 availability. Valle believes the escalation of prices will not level off until after *Cosby* is cleared.

Joseph D. Zaleski, Viacom domestic syndication president, agreed that *Cosby* will be the next record setter in off-network sitcoms, but he isn't bothered by questions of whether stations will be able to afford it. "By the time *Cosby* is offered," he said, "all the stations that are not going to make it will be filtered out." Zaleski said he has already been approached by major station groups with proposals that he described as record-breakers. He said that Viacom has not formalized marketing plans yet.



Another way independents are tackling first-run production is to take increasing advantage of vertical integration between program producers and stations. At every turn, station groups—and not just independent ones—are joining with suppliers to produce programing they can air on their stations as well as use for a revenue source by participating in the back-end profits from their syndication. This trend is continuing with ex-

panded participation this year.

The New Program Group, a consortium comprising Metromedia, Taft, Gannett, Hearst and Storer, was created to produce *Small Wonder*. And Tribune Broadcasting has banded with several suppliers: Viacom (for a first-run ad hoc movie network called *TV NET* and a late-night comedy strip called *Comedy Break*); Group W Productions (for a first-run children's animated strip called *Ghostbusters*), and Claster Television (for *G.I. Joe*, another children's show).

This year has Taft Broadcasting becoming partners with 20th Century Fox in *Dream Girl U.S.A.*, and Taft, with its subsidiary Worldvision and major advertiser Procter & Gamble producing *Throb*. Outlet Communications, which owns five affiliates and two independents, has gotten together with ABR Entertainment to produce a first-run game show called *Crosswits*.

And independents have helped shift animated children's shows from a network-only business to one largely controlled by independents—it has even reached the point where many are openly predicting that at least one of the networks will produce no animated children's programing for Saturday morning within the next few years.

According to the New York-based station rep firm Seltel, 20 new advertiser-supported first-run animated strips are being introduced at INTV and the upcoming NATPE International convention in New Orleans. That is in addition to some 101 children's shows already in the marketplace, including 31 which are advertiser supported in some form.



Independents have learned this bonanza is not without its price. Before they got into first-run animation, most of the regular animated series—*Road Runner*, *Tom & Jerry*, *Bugs Bunny*, etc.—were sold for cash. Now nearly all the first-run animated strips being purchased by independents are offered on a barter or barter-plus-cash basis, and that is not without its problems. And in some cases, supply seems to exceed demand. "The need definitely has been filled and now there is an overabundance," said Henry Siegel, chairman of LBS Communications, a major supplier of first-run animated children's programing and one of the pioneers in that market.

Because of this abundance, independents have created new dayparts for first-run animation by scheduling children's shows on weekend mornings opposite the networks' children's schedules. "No longer do the three networks have Saturday morning tied up for kids," said Farrell Meisel, vice president and director of programing at Seltel. "Independents are finding it's good for advertising to have a kid's base six days a week to negotiate better."

But if a station drops a show it is still obligated to carry the barter spots. Further, said Zvi Shoubin, program director at WPHL-TV Philadelphia, the "problem that stations in main are facing is that the contracts are for two-to-three years so that once a station