

Fox gets down to programming business

Prime time lineup that debuted April 5 met with positive reaction from affiliates; advertisers get expected results

After all the pre-launch hoopla, interviews, rumors and denials, the Fox Broadcasting Co. settled down to business last week and soon found itself doing what its three much larger competitors have done for years—revising its prime time schedule.

Pleased by the back-to-back ratings performances of its first two prime time series on April 5, Fox programmers decided to leave *The Tracey Ullman Show* in the slot following *Married...With Children*, and change the time periods for two upcoming comedy series, *Duet* and *Mr. President*. Under the new format, the final Sunday night schedule on May 3 will look like this: *21 Jump Street*, which debuted last night, at 7 p.m.; *Married* at 8 p.m.; *Ullman* at 8:30 p.m.; *Mr. President* at 9 p.m., and *Duet* at 9:30 p.m.

Fox used the first night of its prime time lineup on April 5 to gauge the compatibility of the programs on the Sunday night sched-

ule. The fledgling network presented its first two programs three times each over three hours for maximum viewing potential. That led to a cumulative overnight rating in Nielsen's 13 metered markets of 15.3/24 for *Married* and 13/20 for *Ullman* (see "In Brief" for national ratings). Fox had guaranteed advertisers an initial six rating.

By combining the ratings and shares, Fox argued it presented an accurate ratings picture since no one was likely to watch a show more than once. But Arnold Becker, vice president of national television research for CBS, claimed the tactic was unfair since advertisers bought spots individually rather than in groups of three.

Individually, *Married* earned a 6.1/10 during the first half-hour, followed by a 4.4/7 the second and 3.9/6 the third. *Ullman* received a 4.7/8 the first half-hour, a 3.7/5 the second and 3.3/5 the third. In six of the 13 markets, Nielsen officials said *Married* did a six or better during its first half-hour on the stronger Fox stations.

"The ratings were higher than we expected," a Fox spokesman said. "That was the

whole idea behind the multiple viewing concept." The reaction was also generally positive from 108 Fox affiliates—happy they could add some original programming to their previously dismal Sunday night schedules—and from advertisers and programmers, who were glad they had a new outlet.

Gary Lieberthal, chairman and chief executive officer of Columbia/Embassy Television, which supplied Fox Broadcasting with *Married*, said the unusual debut format made it difficult to predict how the shows will perform in the future. "It was very misleading," he said.

Most of the skepticism, not surprisingly, came from the three networks. CBS's Becker pointed out that Fox's rating performance in the 13 cities averaged only slightly higher than those stations' combined average the previous week. It could be 10 years before Fox begins to make inroads, said Becker, adding, "It doesn't frighten me." An ABC source compared Fox's small Sunday night share to the network's, which garnered 65% of the viewing audience on April 5.

Advertisers, however, were supportive. "I think it's pretty much in line with what we figured," said Mel Conner, senior vice president and director of network operations for DFS Dorland. "It's a long-range operation for them. Sunday and Saturday nights are not going to take off like a rocket." Rupert Murdoch's \$150-million first-year investment in Fox Broadcasting—\$110 million for programming and \$40 million for salaries, start-up and overhead expenses, advertising, promotion and publicity—shows Fox "will be in there for the long-haul," he said.

With the new commercial broadcast programming service, Conner said, advertisers can be more "program specific" in their ad budget allotment and negotiate better rates with the networks, syndicators and cable. Paul Issacson, a vice president with Young & Rubicam, added his agency supported Fox because "we thought we could negotiate deals with good potential for our clients. It's safe and the downside is limited."

Affiliates, meanwhile, are pleased by the original programming that is available to them. Julie Lux, program director at Fox affiliate KSHB-TV Kansas City, Mo., said her station had virtually written off Sunday nights in the year prior to Fox's prime time start-up. The UHF independent had been generating ratings of ones and twos with syndicated sitcoms on Sunday nights, barely beating a start-up independent that showed movies, she said.

Dozens of viewers phoned the station to give their reaction to *Married* and *Ullman*, and Lux estimates 90% were favorable. The remainder found fault with the content of *Married*, a graphic show by network standards. Writers-producers Michael Moyer and

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