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## **Why the Broadcast Networks Can't Take the Summer Off**

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*Article Highlights:*

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The Big Four can no longer hang the 'gone fishing' sign out for the summer; solid cable network programming forces broadcast nets into year round fresh programming cycle

As broadcast television continues its fight to shore up its future, the Big Four can no longer afford to turn the lights off in the summertime. And this year, they won't.

Last week during the semi-annual Television Critics Association press tour, Fox's Kevin Reilly and ABC's Stephen McPherson reiterated their pledges to do better than in 2009, when the broadcast nets experienced their worst summer tune-in on record. Both told B&C recently that they planned to air original episodes of scripted series when the temperature rises.

"We can't end the season in May then say, OK, here's the summer," McPherson, ABC Entertainment Group president, said following a TCA executive Q&A.

Fox presented a TCA panel last week on Code 58, an hour-long scripted series developed to air in the summer, starring Bradley Whitford and Colin Hanks. The series comes from Matt Nix, the creator of USA's summer smash Burn Notice. Like Burn Notice, Code 58 is produced by company sibling Fox TV Studios, which specializes in alternative (read: cost-efficient) production models. "That is really our first step to beginning to really break down this spring-summer curtain call that we have in May," Fox Entertainment President Reilly said. "We are programming the summers."

ABC also has a series from FTvS on tap this summer, the crime drama The Gates. And the network earlier this month picked up for this summer the comedic drama Scoundrels, based on New Zealand series Outrageous Fortune and produced by its sibling producer ABC Studios.

Reilly and McPherson said publicly what network execs are saying in the boardrooms. As one put it: "We can't really afford to let cable have summer to itself anymore."

While USA Network recorded the highest-rated summer of any cable network in history last year and many others scored historic bests of their own, none of the broadcast nets' summer 2009 averages cracked a 2 rating in the key 18-49 demographic. ABC last summer thrice posted a 1.1, the lowest weekly demo rating ever by the Big Four.

In the last several years, cable networks have consistently grown their audience by tactically saving their best shots for the season, when broadcasters have stuck with repeats and low-cost reality fare.

But if most recent history is any indication, NBC's Jay Leno imbroglio and Fox's new reality of planning for American

Idol life without Simon Cowell indicate that primetime supremacy is a battle that must be fought and strategized weekly, without warm-weather interruption. There are three big reasons that has to happen:

#### 1. The Stakes Are Higher in the Battle for Buzz.

"I'm tired of reading about cable," Reilly told B&C late last year, and among broadcast execs, he is not alone.

"There is a little bit of a perception issue with broadcast versus cable in the summer," one network executive said. "It used to be there were one or two new cable shows each summer; now there are two or three. They're doing a better job, they're smart about originals. But one or two series get 3 or 4 million people and everyone says it's the greatest thing since sliced bread."

And as another network executive pointed out, many of the top-rated cable networks are buoyed by the off-network run of broadcast shows that make up a large amount of the schedules on USA, TNT and TBS in particular.

But buzz today is worth more than bragging rights to the networks. Perception drives tune-in, and messages about what viewers should expect of the Big Four versus their entertainment network counterparts in cable.

There's also that word again: retrans. This summer, the perception game is particularly crucial for the broadcasters as they continue their quest for bigger cash payouts in their retransmission-consent agreements with multichannel video providers. The argument that broadcast networks have the must-see programs that cable networks don't is much tougher to make when cable is getting gobs of glory for summertime smashes while broadcasters appear to be slacking.

Fox's leverage in its showdown with Time Warner Cable at the end of 2009 was certainly helped by the BCS Bowl Games it had at the beginning of this year, as well as this month's season premieres of American Idol and 24. Its summer lineup would have told a less compelling—and convincing—story.

#### 2. Scurrying for Scatter.

As all of television continues to struggle to find advertising revenue, every ratings point matters. It stands to reason that a better programmed and promoted summer is an investment in a better-rated summer. Ratings translate to revenue, and every TV company out there has to be driving revenue year-round today, not just during the TV season they sell in the upfronts. And with scatter pricing perking up, the networks need to take advantage while the getting's good.

#### 3. Promoting the Fall.

The selling seasons are undergoing shifts, but the traditional TV season is still where the networks butter their bread. And while virtually every network is able to point to an encouraging primetime newcomer or strong returning favorite in the 2009-10 TV season, the drumbeat that "broadcast is dead" has slowed but not stopped. The Big Four have the task ahead in the fall of growing their promising properties into new powerhouses that command the big ad premiums and retrans cash they'll certainly need to bankroll their future existence.

The networks had some positive stories pop out of fall 2009, and they have a better chance of building on those successes with a summer that serves as a strong promotional platform. That means putting together a smarter mix of attention-grabbing new series, original episodes of existing shows and smart repeat patterns of shows the networks are continuing to build.

CBS has had success in growing its comedies by keeping them in their time slots and repeating them through summer. ABC plans to do the same with its new Wednesday comedy block, and expect CBS to give newcomers NCIS: Los Angeles and The Good Wife—which were both renewed last week for second seasons—some repeat love. So what took them so long?

As McPherson said after his TCA session last week, "Summer is always tough." A significant change of this magnitude takes time and money. Summer on the broadcast networks is no different.

Original programming requires an investment. And viewership levels go down in the summer, so any spending has to be done while taking into account the fact that there are fewer eyeballs to attract to add up to a hit worth paying for. The repeats networks have leaned on in summer in recent years are already paid for. Nets have turned to reality in summer because the genre generally represents their best opportunity to air broadly appealing shows at a low cost. While the networks are all experimenting with various models and co-productions to mount scripted series economically, no genre can be produced as cheaply as reality.

Broadcast has a big tradition to shake. This tradition is tied to a huge and tangled development-production-premiere cycle that's still linked to ratings sweeps in the traditional September-to-May season that affiliates use to set ad rates. Broadcast networks still do the bulk of their development through fall and winter, set their fall schedules in spring, produce in summer and launch in fall. If a show doesn't make the fall schedule, it might get a midseason berth—or be "burned off" in the summer.

“For broadcast, it requires a shift in mentality—among people, viewers and critics alike,” says a network executive. “People still think that if it's on in the summer, it's a castoff; it's not going to be good. So you have that hump to get over.”

Shari Anne Brill, senior VP and director of programming at media buying firm Carat, confirmed that's the way the advertiser community sees it, too. “Summer will remain a great time for cable unless the networks start employing a very different strategy,” Brill told B&C late last year.

For several years, Reilly has been one of the most vocal proponents among executives of shifting the development cycle and moving the premiere rhythm to a year-round model. He calls this summer's plan at Fox the first step toward a true trimester system, and says he started looking at summer 2010 in summer 2009.

How do they plan to do it?

Don't expect the network heads and scheduling chiefs to have a summit to start the schedule shift, but one network executive says they've all pretty much gotten the picture. “It's not something we're ever going to get together and do,” confirms the exec. “But I hope the message is strong enough that people have to figure it out for themselves.”

The good news: It doesn't take much to create a spark. “It takes a series or two,” says Kelly Kahl, senior executive VP of CBS Primetime. “People just want to watch something new. And I don't think low-cost has to be bad; it should just be innovative.”

Reilly says Fox, for one, is putting in that effort. “We are ordering summer shows, and we're going to market them,” he said at TCA. “We're going to tell America [the shows are] important. These are not the leftovers, these are not the throwbacks, and we are going to begin to try to bridge from the spring to the summer to keep the audience flow going all year long.”

While TV's biggest-ticket comedies and dramas are not expected to sizzle up the summer anytime soon, network chiefs are recalling that even an experimental summer push can pay off. As one executive points out: “Look at Survivor, Idol. If you put a little time and effort into something, you can see benefits down the road.”

When the time does come for networks to pony up for the studios' best, biggest-ticket fare, at least one top studio executive is all for it. “If it's properly marketed, absolutely,” the exec says. “Because there's less competition and there's more of an opportunity to attract an audience. There's an audience to be found in the summer. Basic cable has proved that.”

Here's a look at what the Big Four are doing this summer:

FOX

Code 58, a new action-comedy featuring Whitford and Hanks as detectives partnered in the property crimes division, is Fox's biggest play for the summer. It will preview on two nights during the May sweeps before making its June 7 series premiere in its Monday 9 p.m. slot.

Another bit of new programming, set for late summer, is a multi-part special based on the search for cast members in Glee, one of the promising new shows of the 2009-10 TV season. Fox sees Glee as having the chops to become an enduring franchise, and the specials are devised to help continue growing the developing fan community surrounding the show. The specials will lead into the fall premiere of Glee's second season, which Fox ordered last week.

In addition, the network intends to run original episodes of Lie to Me starting in the spring and continuing into summer. And So You Think You Can Dance will likely be back this summer as well. Then there was the walloping announcement last week that Simon Cowell will segue from judging American Idol after this season to executive-producing and judging on TheX Factor, starting in the fall of 2011. That means Dance stands to serve in the summer slot in year-round rotation of talent competitions on Fox, with X Factor in fall and Idol in midseason, Fox executives said last week.

ABC

McPherson earlier this month managed expectations for how quickly change will come this summer, telling B&C that “there are still going to be doldrums in the summer” (see “Steve McPherson Gets the Last Laugh,” Jan. 11).

To his point about not making a full stop at the end of the regular TV season in May, McPherson told B&C he'd like to continue some series from the regular season on into the summer, much as Fox is likely to do with Lie to Me. Depending on how V and FlashForward perform when ABC brings them back in midseason, he says, original episodes of those two dramas could be candidates to bridge into summer.

Then he has Scoundrels and The Gates on tap, and the network's summer hit game show Wipeout will be back. Expect more reality, too. Monday and Wednesday are likely to have a bit of a theme to them, with Monday being romance-oriented and Wednesday tuned toward action.

Expect repeats of the new comedy block on Wednesday as well. ABC may also continue repeating some of its regular season dramas; however, the network's serialized hours have proved not to repeat well.

CBS

CBS' summer is likely again to be built around its annual staple, Big Brother. A brand-new reality project or two could make it on before Brother debuts, perhaps in mid-July as it has in the past. In addition, CBS has two Canadian co-production dramas in the can, Flashpoint and The Bridge. At least one will probably get a summer run.

CBS is also in the enviable position of having a lot of the kind of shows that repeat well: comedies and procedural dramas. The network's tack of repeating them in summer in their regular time slots—particularly the comedies—has been credited with fanning growth. The network could get creative with marathoning repeats of NCIS: LA and The Good Wife.

NBC

Summer in recent years has been important to fourth-place NBC, as a good performance can mean a bump up to third. This summer, of course, comes at a turning point for the network, following NBC Universal TV Group boss Jeff Gaspin's Jan. 10 announcement that NBC has decided to stop airing The Jay Leno Show at 10 as of Feb. 12. All eyes will be on the network as it re-imagines its 10 p.m. time slot Monday to Friday. NBC will certainly be crossing all the fingers it can to not only get out of last place for a time, but to provide a promotional platform for the fall, when its watchful new owners at Comcast will be closer to approval of their deal.

Summer's top-rated America's Got Talent has been a bright spot in summer for the network, which is expected to rely heavily on it. Talent is slated to air through the entire summer, from Memorial Day to Labor Day. NBC usually runs more Dateline in the summer.

NBC will probably also try launching new reality shows but is not expected to premiere any original scripted fare this summer; all of its new development is poised for the fall. However, episodes of Friday Night Lights that have aired only on DirecTV—not on NBC—are in the mix, as are episodes of Law & Order: Criminal Intent that have aired on USA Network but not NBC.