

Cable Nostalgia

New technologies have the paradoxical effect of giving new life to old TV programs.

By Michael A. Kashmer / *Digital Broadband Programming Consultant*

Cable programmers are asked constantly how their shows perform in the ratings. Their entire network lineups are under the critical eye of everyone who follows the industry. Every network has some hits and misses, so no one should really be surprised by the range of results.

One way for programmers to boost ratings is by bringing back oldies but goodies. TV audiences are overwhelmed by all the video choices they have at their fingertips, so any level of familiarity and name recognition can give a network a healthy boost. Streaming services are providing older titles to new audiences, and the viewer response, in many cases, is very good. Millennials who have binge-watched old episodes of shows from the 1970s or 1980s may be ready to watch new episodes of the same shows.

Take a look at a program lineup from a few years ago to see if any show had “legs” that took the program or series to syndication and beyond. If a show made it this far, you can catch an episode of it tonight.

These TV shows that keep coming back or never went away are spiffed up with new hosts, brighter sets and what seems like louder music. There are some prime-time game shows that fit this description.

THE WAY WE WERE

How do viewers’ nostalgia needs help fuel this trend? Political tumult in the United States may inspire viewers to fondly remember how things used to be. (“Let’s go back to the good old days; the ’70s might be far enough.”) Watching a show that brings back wistful memories of past places or periods makes viewers feel better than zombie apocalypse series, which just make them want to keep the front door locked. Fortunately, network programmers are expert in all things retro.

Shows that represent viewers’ youthful innocence, complete with pop-culture trappings that still look familiar, are fed by social media. A big part of the success of nostalgic fare is the energy that viewers can give a remake via social media. This may be an attempt on the part of viewers to control what is available on TV. Viewers who promote a program on Facebook and Twitter can feel responsible for part of the show’s success.

These nostalgistas can whip up a powerful marketing brew that would otherwise cost the networks millions. Several years ago, there might have been 10–20 million viewers per episode for a popular show. In today’s fragmented media era, a rewind of a ’70s program might achieve 1–2 million viewers and still be called a moderate success. That’s because plenty of TV viewers watch cable, streaming and DVD versions of movies, shows, music videos, and TV commercials; participate in fan contests, trivia clubs and reunions; and purchase collectibles.

Evergreen shows and their networks have devised marketing strategies that harness the “feel good” vibes of the past for those who are heavily involved in their careers.

Here are some nostalgic shows that are being reborn:

- MTV’s VH1 is dead, and in August 2016, MTV Classic took over that channel. The new channel will show millennials what they missed by not being around from the 1980s through the 2000s.
- Ashton Kutcher’s “Punk’d” is back, as is “Jackass” and other shows with very few people of color.
- On CBS, MacGyver, the clever secret agent, is returning after an absence of 30 years. Will SNL create a new skit based on the new MacGyver?
- Showtime welcomes back “Twin Peaks” after a quarter century. We can all watch one of the stars fold his underwear again.
- HBO’s “Tales From the Crypt” episodes, with a new twist for the character Cryptkeeper, will appear on TNT this time around.

None of these shows are shot-by-shot remakes. Some characters and plots need a little sandpapering to give the programs a cleaner story line, but the shows will keep the patina that hooked TV viewers in the first place.

As TV revisits its familiar past, you too may see something that makes you feel inspired once more. ❖

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