

'Characters Welcome' versus 'Best Original Stories': The Importance of Synergy Between Scripted Series and Branding

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Flow Conference 2012 – The *Mad Men* Effect? Original Scripted Series and Cable Network (Re)Branding Panel

While *Mad Men* and AMC have been at the forefront of discussion about the rise of scripted programming on formerly niche cable networks, AMC's very public and confusing business decisions over the last couple of years—the extended contract negotiations with *Mad Men* creator Matthew Weiner and the sudden removal of *Walking Dead* showrunner Frank Darabont chief among them—reflect a crucial point about the relationship between scripted series and branding (or rebranding) that other cable networks should pay attention to: Scripted series development and the brand campaign need to strategically work together.

AMC's problems arguably began when they came out of the gate with two of the best dramas in television history in *Mad Men* and *Breaking Bad*. The critical and awards acclaim that those two series garnered pushed AMC to concoct the "Best Original Stories" slogan and brand, even though the network was not particularly ready, financially, developmentally or structurally, to fully support or back up those claims. AMC branded themselves as a major threat to the HBO throne but it takes more than a few perceived-quality programs to establish a brand, especially when the development process produces duds like *The Prisoner* remake, *The Killing* and *Hell on Wheels* (the latter two which received second seasons despite little positive critical attention and declining ratings, suggesting the network kept them alive as to not seem weak) and the network's financial realities result in the likes of syndicated *CSI: Miami* episodes making it onto the schedule. While that second choice makes great business sense, it completely conflicts with the brand (re-runs aren't exactly original, are they?).

Somewhat similar discords have popped up throughout basic cable. TBS has had success with its syndicated comedy programming, therefore justifying the "Very Funny" brand identity but

struggled mightily to transfer that goodwill over to the original programming side. While people might be excited about *Cougar Town* relocating to the network, that still doesn't count as original. For TBS, the brand and slogan work but the original scripted programming does not support it. Elsewhere, other basic cable networks have struggled syncing a palpable brand image with appealing native scripted programming. A&E made some waves with *The Beast*, *The Cleaner* and miniseries events like *The Andromeda Strain* but the "Real Life. Drama." tagline still applies more to the network's slew of "reality" programming. SpikeTV has, for a while, attempted to lure in young men and done okay in that regard, but not because of any big scripted original achievement.

Conversely, basic cable's biggest successes—USA Network, Syfy, TNT, ABC Family and after some searching, MTV—have made certain that each new scripted program (and in many cases, unscripted program) fits snugly alongside the others, and that all shows reflect the themes and style of the network's brand. I would argue that USA Network's "Characters Welcome" brand campaign is the most successful and most far-reaching of its kind but Syfy's turn towards lighthearted and only-somewhat-science-fiction-y series since the "Imagine Greater" rebrand and TNT's factory of procedurals in the "We Know Drama" era have been almost equally impressive in their construction of a tight relationship between original programming and brand. And perhaps not so coincidentally, USA Network, Syfy and TNT are three of the basic cable networks that have committed the most time and resources to developing original scripted programming.

Many cable networks are trying to find that "next *Mad Men*," or at least get into the scripted programming game, just as many of them are quickly coming around to the idea that a well-constructed, wide-reaching brand image is a major key to success in the contemporary television landscape. But most importantly, networks are best served by making certain that original scripted programming and the brand image are linked together as part of a deeply connected network-wide experience.

However, the triumphs of networks like USA or TNT do not account for networks like Bravo or E! that have had similar success with mostly unscripted or reality programming. The growth in original scripted programming on cable does not pose *that much* of a challenge to unscripted or reality programming. The profit margins and need to fill a 24-hour daily schedule alone are enough to keep cheap reality (or syndicated) content around. I think the real point here is that whatever approach to development cable networks take – mostly scripted programming, mostly reality or a combination of multiple types of programming – they need to more strongly consider how those creative choices shape the brand, or vice versa.