

# The value of airtime

For a television channel, running promotional resources should be like running a business.



**EFFECTIVE TIMING** – Alan James and Jo Wilkinson



**T**he most talented creatives can make the most wonderful promo advertising a TV programme, series or channel but if it's not scheduled properly then all that time, money and effort has been wasted.

This was the message from UK experts Alan James and Jo Wilkinson of James&Wilkinson Media (JWM) during a session at the recent PromaxBDA Africa Conference held in Johannesburg.

"Airtime is incredibly valuable because it's the broadcaster's biggest marketing tool and helps to brand the channel. This will become even more relevant once digital terrestrial television is launched in South Africa.

"You want to get your promotional messages out as broadly as possible but promotion has become more complex in today's multi-channel, multimedia environment," said James.

He stressed that broadcasters must have an objective with regards to their promotional activities. "An objective is a desired result that is envisioned, planned and has a commitment to achieve. Next is strategy – a plan of action designed to achieve a specific goal, followed by tactics (how to implement the strategy).

"We've found that while broadcasters have objectives, they're usually buried at senior management level. The majority objective for any broadcaster is the need to maximise audiences and add value to the brand. UK pay-TV operator Sky has a clear objective that differentiates it from competitor Virgin. Sky's single-minded focus is to be 'Best of Pay' and its

consumer proposition is 'Believe in Better'. It is the only UK broadcaster to have launched a 3D channel."

## Pillars

Wilkinson talked about pillars on which to shape your promotional activity. "Each broadcaster should dictate what pillars are relevant to themselves but here are three examples: firstly, heartland (your loyal audience) versus next generation audiences. Secondly, reputation versus viewing – ask yourself whether you are trying to change people's perceptions.

"Thirdly, content versus other services – what percentage of promotion should be on channels and what should be on other services? What kind of content improves the brand perception? What content delivers higher viewing? Once you answer these questions you can draw up a formal plan. Allocate the percentage of promotion against each category and plot which audiences are commercially valuable and those that are less commercially valuable."

It is vitally important to know your resource and your channel. This involves the number of ARs; the number of promotional minutes; the number of breaks; the channel's reach and how many campaign trails your network portfolio can support efficiently and effectively by week, month and year.

## Money in the wallet

Knowing all of the above is like knowing how much money you have in your wallet,

according to James.

He continued: "It's important to make every cent count. There is a big kit of parts at play on channels, such as campaign shape, which impacts how your message is communicated. You don't want promos to reach their peak too soon otherwise viewers will have forgotten about the programme by the time it's broadcast."

Wilkinson noted that the theory of frequency (how many times a promo is repeated) has been around for a long time. "A newer trend is recency, which focuses the campaign close to transmission. If you need to reach as many viewers as possible then frequency is the way to go. Recency can be used to promote different episodes in a series, whereas if you have a complex message you need frequency. For new content and series launches frequency is essential. Huge campaigns need both frequency and recency.

"Ninety-five percent of all campaigns on TV use the burst strategy – a burst of airtime that builds up over time. Then there is the drip strategy for when you want a build up a few ARs over a couple of weeks. This is good for branding messages as they're timeless. You can also use drip strategy to promote the news.

"The pulse strategy utilises different snippets of a narrative series to build up interest over a long period of time, like for the finale of the episodic series *Lost*. In a back-weighted campaign – the newest strategy – social media is used to promote the content. This strategy is for more niche content."

There is also the issue of how many episodes within a series should be supported by promos.

## The art of cross-promotion

James described cross-promotion as the lifeblood of any channel portfolio. "People consume content differently these days, based on age and several other factors. Audiences no longer consume a single media outlet so use the power of your portfolio to reach as many consumers as possible.

"However, this doesn't mean you should always cross-promote. Do it only when it's relevant to the audience and editorially relevant (when you have similar programmes on other channels or platforms). And, cross-promotion must always be timely."

## Junctions

Wilkinson spoke about 'break flow' over junctions (the space between the end of one programme and the beginning of the next, or commercial breaks within a programme). "The three main roles of a junction are: navigate, deliver choice and information to the viewer and provide channel recognition. Junction structures include squeeze-backs and announcements or announcements only.

"Research has shown that there are three types of viewers: the appointment viewer who tends to be older and programme-oriented; the considered surfer who has a core of favourite channels; and the super surfer who is a TV tart and not loyal to any channel."

James and Wilkinson described on-air continuity as an important tool for junctions. "An announcement is personal and acts like a recommendation. It can really aid viewer navigation, recognition and branding of a channel." 