

MEDIA LIFE

MEDIA LIFE INTERVIEW

Pondering the promise of MTV's Logo

What it will mean for advertisers targeting gays

By Diego Vasquez
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*When Viacom promised to launch a gay cable network last year, it was hardly a surprise. The media giant had been mulling the idea for years yet never seemed to find the right time. With gay marriage in the news and Bravo's "Queer Eye" guys all over TV, Viacom finally committed. On Thursday, after a four-month delay to chase more subscribers, MTV Networks' Logo will launch with 10 million potential viewers. The new channel will feature mostly gay-themed movies, with originals such as wedding makeover show "Love Comes First" and the documentary "The Evolution Will Be Televised" filling out the schedule. Though it certainly seems like the right time for such a launch, there are still a lot of questions surrounding it. Are advertisers interested in gay media? Will the network have heterosexual crossover appeal? Has gay media gone mainstream? Media Life speaks with **Howard Buford, founder and president of multicultural ad agency Prime Access**, for some answers.*

When will gay media become mainstream? Or have we already reached that point?

If you're talking about gay-targeted vehicles, by definition they don't become mainstream. If it's really gay media it's going to retain a lesbian and gay sensibility. For example, Ebony magazine, even after 60 years, isn't a mainstream publication. It retains an African American sensibility.

Thirty years ago most media, especially television, was indeed mainstream. But it's much more fragmented now, largely because of technology. As a result, you get more and more targeted media, so there are 24-hour channels about food, weather, gardening, etc. The rule now is for media to have a specific target audience.

One of the issues for Logo, and one of the goals it should have, is to become part of mainstream media *buying*. When advertisers want to reach the general market, now Ebony or Essence is part of that buy, but 20 years ago they were considered a niche buy. If you want to have a general market appeal in 2005, you have to include them.

Logo's challenge is to get media buyers to consider the gay audience as part of their ongoing general audience and to place advertising on Logo as part of that general market outreach. This, as opposed to thinking of it as "only if we want to reach gays and lesbians."

What kind of viewership outside the gay community does a network like Logo expect to get? Does it make sense to market to straight people, since it's assumed that it will get a fair amount of sampling from gays?

I can't say what Logo expects because I'm not a Logo employee, but from my perspective, upon launch there will likely be a strong curiosity factor outside the lesbian and gay community to see Logo.

There's certainly a large curiosity factor among the gay community itself. I don't think it makes sense to market it directly to straights.

I think the real mission is to make Logo a viewing destination for the gay community. At launch, Logo should play very strongly to a broad lesbian and gay audience. It's going to take some work to make it a gay destination on TV. I would doubt that there would be a significant effort marketing it to straights.

We've obviously seen the crossover appeal of gay-themed shows like "Will & Grace" and "Queer Eye." What types of gay-themed shows do best among a broader audience? Are they the same shows that appeal to gays?

Those are shows that capture universal human themes and interests, shows where many sub-audiences can relate to the storyline.

A story well told appeals to a broad audience. On the surface it may be a gay story, or a Latino story, or a war story, but if it captures human imagination, it appeals to larger audiences. The movie "Ray" is a good example.

And stories with gay themes consistently appeal strongly to a gay audience. Many of the films Logo has acquired feature gay characters, etc., but many of them are some of the most popular films released in the last 20 years, for example, "In and Out" with Kevin Klein and Tom Selleck.

It was blockbuster hit in the theaters because the comedy reached out to a much broader audience. There are a number of properties like that that a channel like Logo has access to.

The other side is that there will be many independent films that will appeal to gay men and lesbians but won't appeal to larger audiences. Showing these films is one of the real roles of Logo, because there is no other reliable place to see these movies in a consistent way. That will be one of the benefits of Logo to a gay and lesbian audience.

How do advertisers view a channel like Logo these days? Have gays become a more popular target group in general for advertisers? Are there still many advertisers reluctant to associate with a gay media outlet?

A number of advertisers are excited about the debut of Logo. There have been limited ways to reach large numbers of lesbian and gay consumers without having to also pay to reach large numbers of non-gay consumers. It's the first efficient television buy for reaching a GLBT audience.

Separately, research shows that the GLBT audience responds twice as well to advertising specifically created for them than to general market advertising, even if it's placed within gay media.

This allows advertisers to create gay-specific advertising and reach a significant audience of gay men and lesbians without a lot of spillover or waste. For marketers who've been committed to the GLBT market for several years now, this is a very important development.

Lesbian and gay consumers are an especially popular target for financial services, travel services, automobiles, fashion and entertainment. I would expect to see those categories well-represented on Logo, because they currently are in lesbian and gay magazines. However, there will still be some individual advertisers who may be reluctant to target gay consumers or place advertising in gay media. Lost sales and shrinking market share often change their mind.

What type of response to the network will marketers and the general public have?

Several marketers have committed up front to advertising on Logo. Most of our clients at Prime Access are Fortune 500 companies, and the majority of those tend to take a "wait and see" attitude toward any new media. They want to see what the content will be, what the ratings will be. Many will take that stance. Those who've had success in the gay market will likely advertise on Logo from the very beginning.

There's an advantage to being the first mover here. Advertisers from the launch will be remembered and will likely have to face less clutter than those coming in 3-6 months later.

Separately, I can't really say how the general public will respond to the channel. In many ways it's not a relevant question in that when Spike TV launched, no one really asked "how will the general public respond?" It assumes there's some issue underlying this, and admittedly there is, more so than for most other channels. But like any channel, if you don't like it, you don't have to watch it.

Why is there a need for Logo? What can gay viewers find on a gay-focused network that they can't find elsewhere?

Again, technology allows us to have a thousand channels or more. The real question is how could there *not* be a Logo? When you look at the narrow programming that other channels offer, the real question is, how have we gone this long without a channel like Logo?

In aiming to be the destination channel for gays and lesbians, Logo will have to offer a consistently authentic lesbian and gay sensibility to its content. There is no 24-hour network that is dedicated to a consistently authentic gay and lesbian sensibility throughout its content choices and editorials, and that's what will really set the channel apart from the rest of the spectrum.

Will Logo, backed as it is by a media giant like Viacom, spark other new gay-themed media outlets?

My guess is there will be a big "wait and see" attitude. People will want to look at the rollout and acceptance of Logo, and the growth of its viewing audience before initiating new gay-themed outlets. Logo, as the first 24-hour digital cable network targeted at gays and lesbians, will seek to position itself as a touch point for the entire gay community. Any gay themed networks launching after it will likely have to segment the gay audience and appeal to a certain sub-group of the gay community to make itself viable.

An on-demand gay network already has launched, and there have been gay newspapers and magazines for years. Will we hit a saturation point with gay media, or is this only a beginning?

Consumers will be the judge of that. Understanding how capitalism works, we will reach a saturation point, but there are still many challenges. One is, if you look at the circulation of the national magazines, they tend to be small; there's still the challenge to significantly increase readership of national gay publications.

On the other hand, there are local gay newspapers that are very well-read in their cities. If you combine their reach, their circulations are significantly higher than the national pubs. Currently the highest-reach medium for the GLBT community is the web, dominated by planetout.com and gay.com, with other significant sites as well.

How much do you think media coverage of the Logo launch will help the network's initial ratings?

Media coverage of a launch always helps viewership. The key objective is to generate trial among your target audience, and certainly media coverage goes a long way toward promoting that. After the launch, the real question is what kind of repeat viewership will it sustain?