

Public broadcasting should not seek the largest audience

Members of the U.S. women's gymnastics team were rightfully proud at the 1984 Olympic games in Los Angeles when they won the silver medal, the team's first since 1948. Yet, 24 hours after the men's team finished with top honors, reporters only asked the women, "Why didn't you get the gold?"

Marketing is the same. Even among the largest firms, No. 2 often is seen as a weak competitor. A firm can successfully serve a niche market and a cable TV network can reap large profits with programming for a special but small interest, yet the predominant view is that only the biggest are the best.

In television, that means that public broadcasting often is criticized because its ratings frequently lag even the poorest-performing commercial outlet.

Therein lies a fundamental problem for American public broadcasting. Criticisms of specific shows are rare, but members of Congress often threaten to cut public funding because the ratings aren't "high enough." Its most popular original programs, such as "Sesame Street," also would

Herbert Rotfeld on Misplaced Marketing



be a success on commercial stations, they argue, and some standard and premium cable networks have developed programming like what has garnered the best ratings on public television. The public system, critics say, is unnecessary.

To an extent, the "failure" of public broadcasting is one of misplaced marketing, but not the type of misplaced marketing most presume. Most people think public broadcasting should do more to market itself to increase ratings for each show, but that is the job of commercial broadcasting.

In fact, if public broadcasting is engaging in misplaced marketing, it is because it is not

doing enough to reach underserved audiences; in a sense, there are not enough low-rated shows on the network.

Almost everyone seems to either listen to public radio or watch public television—just not at the same time or to the same programs. Public broadcasting's marketing mandate has been to design programs that might not be a commercial success. It should use marketing not to seek high ratings but to experiment—to discover and serve audience segments with programs and formats that commercial stations could not or would not try.

Advertising-supported media provide vehicles for marketers to reach desirable audiences. There are reports every week of new publications or networks trying to gain the attention of various target groups. Yet some groups remain poorly served, or not served at all, if marketers find them less desirable as a target for advertising messages.

The purpose of public broadcasting is to provide programming for these overlooked audiences. Commercial networks have cancelled top-rated programs when the audiences were older, rural or otherwise not at-

tractive to advertisers. Newspaper sections are created with an eye toward those who would most attract advertisers, not those with the largest number of potential readers; they seek to appeal to suburban, not inner-city audiences. Many magazines stop publication not from a lack of readers but because of a lack of interested advertisers

At the time same, no one predicted that some of public television's greatest success stories would become so popular or that their appeal would cut across so many segments. With some educational programs, the lack of commercials is a positive aspect regardless of the size of the show's ratings. Such programs might be less socially desirable if created with advertising sales in mind.

Public broadcasting must do a better job of marketing itself to underserved audience segments, although it must do so with more-innovative programming. At the same time, its managers and its critics in Congress should not lose track of the basic goal, which is not to seek the largest audience. ■

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