

A Higher Standard

BY DONNA REED

At the three main television networks for women, programming focuses on women's changing roles and lifestyles, as well as the responsibility these networks have to meet their entertainment and informational needs.

Diversity. It's the primary focus of what programming is all about at each of the three women's networks: Lifetime, Oxygen and Women's Entertainment. Although they all three concentrate mainly on women's changing roles and lifestyles and changing the landscape of network programming in general, each network has a different style and audience. We talked with each of them about women's programming, their responsibilities to the audience and the future for women in broadcasting.

Information and Advocacy

With dramas such as "Strong Medicine," "Wild Card" and "Missing," it's hard to miss the impact Lifetime has made on women's viewing habits and women's lifestyles in general. Although drama is at the forefront of Lifetime's programming, sitcoms such as "Designing Women" and "Golden Girls" are also scheduled, as are interview programs such as "Intimate Portrait" and "Speaking of Women's Health." Whether you're watching biographies, series or original movies, the key ingredient is diversity. Meredith Wagner has been executive vice president, public affairs and corporate communications since 2001.

Under Wagner's leadership, Lifetime is dedicated to using the power of the media to make a positive difference in women's lives through the network's award-winning Our Lifetime Commitment public outreach campaigns. Among others, the initiatives include violence prevention, breast cancer issues and providing women helpful resources throughout the network's award-winning programming.

Through some of its programs such as "Strong Medicine," about two female doctors at a women's clinic in Philadelphia, Lifetime targets its programming to provide entertainment as well as information on health topics important to women.

"We're very proud of the series 'Strong Medicine,'" Wagner said. "Our executive producer, Whoopi Goldberg, won a Gracie Award last year for the series. The producers and the production company spend a lot of time on the medical aspect of the show, so we're airing a lot of relevant medical information, resources and links at the end of the show. We do a lot of research at Lifetime, listening to women and talking to women.

"We look at every piece of programming that goes on the air to see if there's an opportunity to tag it with a nonprofit agency for more resources. Viewers tell us, for example, 'If you do a movie about MS, we want to know more about the issue and how we can help,' which is why a public service message will be at the end of all health-related programming on Lifetime."

As a network targeted to women, Lifetime feels a compulsion not only to entertain and inform women but also to advocate for improvements to their lives.

"Because we are a network for women, we are able to explore topics in a way that many other networks can't," Wagner said. "Our big campaign focus is on voting, stopping violence against women, breast cancer, and women's health and building self-esteem. We're not just able to inform women of the issues and give them resources, which we do, but also serve as an advocate for women."

Lifetime is currently working on a number of legislative bills that would affect women's lives in a positive way, such as abolishing the practice known as "drive-through mastectomies," where women are



Debby Beece, president of programming, Oxygen Media.
OXYGEN MEDIA PHOTO

kicked out of the hospital only eight hours after a mastectomy because of insurance regulations.

"We've been collecting signatures from women to present to Congress to try and get this practice stopped," Wagner said. "We have now about nine million signatures. One of the things women tell us, because we have this deep relationship with our viewers, is, 'You have access to Wash-

ington; you have access to policy makers; you can help us get heard.' That's an important element of Lifetime's work now."

dynamic nature of women's lives today, with a touch of much-needed humor. Although the network reaches the audience's funny bone, it focuses on quality programming done by women for women.

Debby Beece, president of programming for Oxygen Media, heads up program development and current programming. Beece, who we caught up with on her return from the 2004 Gracie Allen Awards® Gala, where Oxygen won two Gracies®, said, "I think one of the things that attracts people to the entertainment industry is the ability to communicate and get different voices and different messages out there in an entertaining way and tell stories that either make people feel better or make people want to do better things."

One of the ways Oxygen attempts to make viewers feel better is by going beyond the programming standards of yesteryear, the days of "The Donna Reed Show" and "Father Knows Best."

"Media reflects what's happening in culture," Beece said. "Sometimes it tries to lead the way, and sometimes it lags behind.

been defined. We tend to put female characters at the forefront of everything we do, and they're very uncharacteristic for television."

Oxygen's executives and programmers



Meredith Wagner, executive vice president, public affairs and corporate communications, Lifetime Television.
LIFETIME PHOTO

{The women's networks are held to a higher standard of how women are portrayed. The viewer or consumer sees us at a higher calling than other networks because we have this promise to women. We really try to reflect women's lives today and serve as an advocate for issues important to them.}

MEREDITH WAGNER, LIFETIME TELEVISION

At Oxygen Media, the focus on women's programming, while definitely diverse, leans toward the idea of love and laughter, with the belief that smart women need a place to have fun that respects their intelligence and doesn't take itself too seriously. Series such as "Girls Behaving Badly," "Absolutely Fabulous" and "Talk Sex with Sue Johanssen" offer a variety of programming that is diverse, fun-loving and informational. Launched in 1998, Oxygen wanted to create a network reflecting the

Girls Just Wanna Have Fun

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Sometimes it's on target, and sometimes it's all at once.

We tend to concentrate more on trying to be funny, such as with 'Girls Behaving Badly,' showing women in a new light, very outrageous, very comedy-based. It's not based in a lot of the conventions women grew up with, so for me, it's a cathartic kind of show. Our other new show, 'Good Girls Don't,' is also about women who are large, comical, out there, flawed, female. They're not perfect, they don't have a lot of money, they don't fit the conventional stereotype of what's on television. We don't do a lot of drama; don't do classic women's weepy shows typical of the 1950s, which in some ways was how women's programming had

firmly believe that most people want to feel better when they watch television, that it's an escape for them, a chance to relax. The network's goal is to appeal to them without exploiting them. "We do a lot of work with women," Beece said. "We talk to women all the time and feel like we're trying to appeal to their good, optimistic side. They don't want to feel like they're wasting time. They don't want to be mean, and they want to have fun and be able to watch television with their families and not have to worry so much."

Connecting Emotionally

For WE: Women's Entertainment, it's all about getting in touch with the interests and passions of today's woman. Its programming

runs the gamut from inspiring originals such as "Mix it Up" with Gracie-Award-winner Courteney Cox to miniseries such as "Dangerous Liaisons," from dramas such as "Felicity" and "Cinematherapy" to the largest collection of women's interest films. While focusing on diversity, WE also targets in on the busy women who need a break, a chance to relax and a way to recharge.

Kathy Dore is president of entertainment services, oversees operations, planning and development for American Movie Classics, Independent Film Channel and WE:

Variety once wrote, "Dore is infusing cable TV with indie spirit."

"It's interesting to see that, in the last year or two, there's an increasing interest in the role women have in that particular art form," Dore said. IFC recently had a documentary special, "In the Company of Women," which traced the history of women in the independent film industry and how this industry provided a tremendous amount of early successes for women in the film industry. "They portrayed this whole range of women's issues and prob-

movies, DVD, cable and so on will have additional opportunities for women," Dore said. "Basically, the Hollywood community looks at young men 12-25 as the primary target for going to the movies. And I think as outlets proliferate and as television networks proliferate it's all about reaching the audience. And perhaps it's a lot easier to reach the audience for meatier films, meatier roles, more substance to films and therefore easier to reach that audience in their homes. Television has a big role to play in that. You see more women actors

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KATHY DORE, WE: WOMEN'S ENTERTAINMENT

Women's Entertainment. As the television industry evolves, women are being recognized as an increasingly important demographic in terms of the television industry overall. "It's interesting to see the intersection of entertainment with the desire and ability to provide role models and to provide and help women," Dore said. "There are three networks focused on programming for women, and certainly there's more than enough room for three networks to exist. If you compare those numbers with the number of networks focused on the male demographic, I think you can see all three networks take on a great deal of responsibility in terms of providing entertainment needs, informational needs and looking to portray basically the full spectrum of women. Probably the most one can expect from television is to do just that, to cover the whole spectrum and eliminate bias."

At IFC, Dore created the first, and what would become the largest, television network dedicated to independent films. As



Kathy Dore, president of entertainment services, overseas operations, planning and development for AMC, IFC and WE: Women's Entertainment. WE PHOTO

lems and allowed actors and directors an opportunity to really practice their craft when Hollywood didn't."

And it's not just independent films where women, and women over 40 at that, are increasingly finding a home. "I think the increasing number of outlets for television,

over 40 who are looking at original programs for television."

As for the future of women's programming, it's important for the networks to target a broader demographic. "At WE," Dore said, "we are dedicated to appeal to and reflect the whole spectrum of women who are out there."

WE is not alone in its desire to reflect the changing landscape of women's lives. All three networks, through their programming and advocacy efforts, help ensure women are entertained, educated and informed. A worthy goal indeed. 📺

Donna Reed, while not exactly the full-time mom depicted in the early days of women in television, is a veteran voice talent specializing in television and radio voiceovers, TV promos and commercials. While her name is synonymous with "almost perfect," her family begs to differ and sees her instead as Peg Bundy awash in waxy yellow buildup. She can be reached at donna@donnareedvo.com.