

## The Makings of a Successful ('History') Show.

By Lee Singletary

On Wednesday, January 26, three top *History Channel* executives visited an excited group of students and faculty at Drexel University to present their take on how an idea for a television show makes it on air.

Last term, Nancy Dubuc, President of both *History* and *Lifetime*, shared insights relating to topics of television marketing strategy and the future outlook for her networks. As a follow-up, her three colleagues, David McKillop, SVP of Development and Programming, Paul Cabana, Executive Producer, and Russ McCarrol, executive producer, discussed how their network takes shows from inception, through the development process and green-lights them for on-air.

Led by interviewer Karen Curry, Drexel's Executive Director of the Rudman Institute, the event featured *History Channel* sizzle videos, questions from Curry and sporadic Q&A with the audience. Most attendees braved the blizzard-like conditions on the Philadelphia streets to attend the event with the hopes of hearing first-hand how a show concept gets on-air and having the chance to hear feedback on their own show concepts.

One would think that there are pre-set formulas and the need for 100 percent approval from network executives to green-light a show for the internationally acclaimed *History Channel*. Actually, as the executives detailed, shows that air on *History* form organically, and are carefully cast with the right talent, reviewed for (historical) accuracy, and launched (with the final approval of McKillop and Dubuc). Simple right?

Much more has to happen to create shows like *Pawn Stars*, which reached a History Channel of seven million viewers on Monday night. McKillops says, "programming comes naturally once [you] understand the viewer," which for *History* is "probably 46-years-old, married to a soccer mom and slightly more 'red-state'." In the television industry, which is dominated by 65 percent female viewership, *History's* demographic is just over 60 percent male.

Casting is a very important process for the success of a new show on the *History Channel*. Paul Cabana, who spearheads the new competition series, "Top Shot" discussed the casting process and stressed the importance of finding the right host. Actor **Colby Donaldson**, who hosts the show, is not only charismatic, but also relates to the network's viewer. On the host, Cabana said, "he is someone average guys in a bar wouldn't want to beat up." Cabana played a video of the intro and first few minutes of the new season of "Top Shot," which, unbeknownst to the lucky attendees, was the first public viewing of the video.

In addition to organic ideas and getting the casting right, another ingredient to a successful show on the network is “understanding,” McKillop describes. Shows on the network must have enough factual, education-based content and also be entertaining to watch. Boiling history down into something people of different educational backgrounds and walks of life can understand is key and is accomplished through a team made up of good storytellers. McKillop says, “Information plus storytelling equals understanding, and [I] think that’s the one thing we’re really good at.” To the student-filled audience, McCarrol stated, “to be successful in television [you] need to learn how to tell stories, and know how to write.” He adds, “If you know how to tell the story, you will always be successful in the business.” McKillop and McCarrol’s theories must be working because the History Channel’s audience grew more than 25 percent in 2010, according to ratings compiled by The A.C. Nielsen Company.

To the average viewer, everything appears positive on their television screens when it comes to programming, especially when the network is buoyed by hits shows like *American Pickers*, *Pawn Stars* and *Ice Road Truckers*. But what happens when shows fail, or don’t represent *History’s* overall brand?

A much-anticipated eight-part miniseries, *The Kennedys*, was removed from *History’s* programming lineup after tens of millions of dollars were spent to back the ambitious project. Just last term at Drexel, Dubuc raved about the project, noting it was *History’s* most expensive program ever and featured high-profile actors Katie Holmes and Greg Kinnear. So what went wrong? Perhaps there was a casting error, lack of historical accuracy or maybe the storytelling team didn’t provide enough “understanding.” Whatever the reason, the network’s executives McKillop and Cabana preferred to “not discuss ‘The Kennedys’.” After the event, Cabana did say that *History* realized that the produced miniseries “did not fit their brand.”

Cabana’s answer was simple enough, though after hearing the inside scoop on how show ideas get green-lit and sitting through a lecture on *History’s* success, it would have been beneficial to hear (in more depth) why shows (especially the most expensive ones) fail.

To close the event, Cabana read a few of the executive’s favorite pitches that students submitted prior to the event. After a couple laughs, the network executives favored a pitch by freshman music industry major Katarzyna Nowacki. The Drexel student’s show idea was for a show about inventions and products that happened by mistake, such as the chocolate chip cookie and *Post-it Notes*. *The History Channel* clearly knows how to produce a successful show, so let’s hope Nowacki’s idea gets the green-light! Let’s also hope she gets the royalty payments before her show gets mysteriously dropped (\*cough, *The Kennedy’s*, \*cough).