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Great expectations

Younger set demands strong complementary online experience

By Catherine Schetting Salfino -- *Broadcasting & Cable*, 3/19/2001

One of the interesting challenges facing any media company is how to make sure it catches the next generation with new media before the competition does. Because, while the older set may still be a bit puzzled about the Internet, it has become obvious that the younger set, which is growing up viewing the Internet and TV as equal media, is going to play a key role in turning new-media ventures into attractive marketing opportunities.

A wealth of opinions surface in discussions of TV and the Internet. Some say Web sites are simply promotional tools for network programming. Others say the Internet is an educational tool when used in conjunction with TV. And still others say there are still kids who just want to kick back and watch a show without multitasking their way through it. Depending on the site, the kid accessing it and the parental supervision involved, each point may hold some truth.

"We think the Internet component is crucial because it extends the mission and educational goals of that program through interactivity," says Michelle Miller, manager, PBS Kids Interactive. "An educational goal can be accomplished through a broadcast with one storyline in 27 minutes. With the Internet, kids can move at their own pace and learning style to foster their creative and critical thinking. For example, if the Internet has a game, kids can take however long they want to learn the concept, using visual and audio clues to learn, instead of just absorbing a linear broadcast."

Disney Channel's Rich Ross, general manager and executive vice president, programming and production, says Internet components are something children expect-and expect to be worth their time.

"Playhouse Disney has a site with a subset of its shows; Zoog has a site and a subset," Ross says. "[Kids have] come to expect that, when they watch a show on Disney, there's an online component equally as exciting as what they see on TV. Kids are savvy, so the site has to give them something extra: more information about a show or its characters, games with 'collector cards,' or other things. Otherwise, they'll get bored with programming."

The biggest difference in thinking between children and their parents is that kids go online for entertainment value.

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"Cartoonnetwork.com provides a variety of options for kids with things like Web Premiere Toons and short films that are extremely popular," says Tim Hall, Cartoon Network's executive vice president. "The merging of TV and the Internet is one of the most interesting changes that's happened in kids TV. We developed Total Immersion cartoons, where we run a show or a special promotion on TV, and online content is offered for a simultaneous experience. During our Toonami block, we ran 'The Intruder.' Every day, when it directed kids to go online at the same time, there were a bunch of really cool games going on. If kids wanted to get to the next level, they had to watch the show the next day. We could see there was no cannibalization of either media. Kids were doing both at the same time."

Which leads to multitasking. More kids than ever have both a TV and computer either in their room or a family room, and they're often using both at once.

Cyma Zarghami, executive vice president and general manager at Nickelodeon, says the trick is to marry the two media to create something more fun than the individual parts.

"Our *Slimetime Live* show plays games that includes kids that are in the audience, online and on the phone," she explains. "Kids online can vote for who they want slimed. Our BubbleCast lets kids play a game in real time during a show. They answer questions based on what's happening during the show. With each correct answer, they get points, and the names on the left of the TV screen show who's in the lead. We've done it with *Slimetime* and *Rugrats*. When we did it with *Rugrats*, we almost shut down the server because there were 130,000 kids trying to play at one time."

Midge Pierce, vice president of programming at WAM!, says the network's most popular programs have companion Web sites where tween viewers can learn more about their favorite stars through live chats or by following the online diaries of a character. It not only helps kids feel connected to each other, but, by providing instantaneous feedback loops to programmers, it helps kids influence programming decisions.

Pierce does say, however, that TV still seems to be a bigger draw than the Internet. "True, kids love to chat online and watch their favorite programs at the same time. But the latest trends show that Internet usage among this age group is tapering. Clearly, the novelty of the Net is waning. I think the anonymity of the Internet is taking its toll. Kids want to feel connected and see who their peers are."

While that may be true, PBS' Miller says the network can tell from its traffic that each TV program drives kids to the Web site at the end of every program.

"Traffic spikes at the end of the half-hour when a show ends and kids go online," she says. "Then, they go back to the shows. There's a loop of viewership. Plus, when they can do something like make a Teletubby wave to them, it makes them feel like they're a part of the action, rather than just a recipient. I have a feeling it gives them a different impression of media than when we were kids."

Networks have taken safety into consideration, too. Cartoonnetwork.com has Cartoon Orbit, a safe community for kids where they can trade digital cards, build home pages and more. But there are no open chats, and a pull-down menu has a list of approved phrases.

PBSkids.org is also concerned with issues of privacy, commerce and technology. Sponsors may display only a static logo, rather than a moving banner ads. Also, when kids click a link button, a bridge page informs them they're leaving PBSkids. "It's a kind of a Web-literacy tip," Miller says, "like what to know before you go. For example, 'Don't talk to strangers on the Web. They're leaving PBS Kids, so we want them to be hyper-aware.'"



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In the end, the question is: Should the Internet drive network business or be a business unto itself? Zarghami says the speculation for a long time was that the Internet would make kids watch less TV. "That turned out to be the opposite," she says. "There were more kids using the Internet last year, yet 2000 was the highest TV-viewing year for kids. The only way the Internet and TV can work together is if it makes the experience richer. One won't replace the other."

"Everyone is trying to figure out the convergence element," says Joel Andryc, executive vice president of programming and development at Fox Family and Fox Kids. "It's an evolving process. Where TV was in the '40s or '50s is where we're at with the Internet now. We will probably see more convergence with TV and the Internet, where you can pop up different windows, view different camera angles and become a director in your own house. You'll just have to figure how to get the buttons on the remote to work it."

Top 20 entertainment sites visited by kids 2-17/January 2001/Source: Media Metrix

	Site	Unique Visitors(000s)
1	Disney Online*	6,963
2	Cartoonnetwork.com	2,124
3	Nick.com	2,060
4	Nickjr.com*	1,206
5	Foxkids.com	848
6	Yahooligans.com	838
7	Smarterkids.com	674
8	KBKids.com	617
9	Barbie.com	613
10	Sesameworkshop.com	561
11	Scholastic.com	486
12	Pokemon.com	452
13	Gurl.com	446
14	Crayola.com	439
15	Mamamedia.com	433

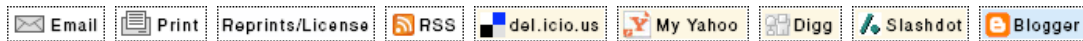


16	Kidsdomain.com	425
17	Unitedmedia.com	377
18	Enchantedlearning.com	327
19	Askjeevesforkids.com	295
20	TheWB.com	293

*Represents an aggregation of commonly owned/ branded domain names.

Unique visitors: The number of total users who visited the reported online property at least once in the given month.

Sample Size: More than 60,000 nationwide.



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