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Tween shall meet

Kids 9-14 are the newest hot programming demo

By Catherine Schetting -- *Broadcasting & Cable*, 3/5/2001

The tween group generally accounts for no more than 20% of the audience, but networks increasingly want their programming to appeal to this group of viewers/consumers.

Who are the tweens? They are currently defined as children between 9 and 14. How one goes about making hits that have such broad appeal is not easy, says Joel Andryc, executive vice president of programming and development for Fox Family and Fox Kids.

"I wish I knew what the secret formula was," Andryc says. "You have to have great, relatable, three-dimensional characters, using the best writers and artists. But even with all those things, who knows why something hits or doesn't."

The most recent validation began this week, with Nickelodeon presenting a 2 1/2-hour Sunday-night block geared to the demo.

While Nickelodeon has always pulled in the tween crowd, it has never overtly marketed to them.

However, a lot of the network's shows appeal to the 9-14 group already. Programming will include live-action and animated shows such as *Taina*, *Caitlin's Way*, *As Told by Ginger*, and *Hangin' With Mr. Cooper*, as well as a weekly countdown of viewers' top music-video picks.

Cyma Zarghami, executive vice president and general manager of Nickelodeon, says the move is designed to give tweens their own branded night, similar to its Saturday night "Snick" programming.

One network seemingly dedicated to the market is WAM! America's Kidz Network, part of the Starz Encore Group LLC. The channel is a commercial-free children's offering basically dedicated to programming for tweens. It provides 60 hours a week of subject-specific educational TV, featuring honor-roll students as on-air hosts. The WAM! Kids also introduce WAM! At the Movies, classic family movies offered every Sunday afternoon.

For Midge Pierce, vice president of WAM! Programming, the key is emphasizing real kids in real situations. "While there is a vast developmental spread in this demo, tweens share one critical commonality: a desire for information that helps them decode their world. The constant thread in our programs is seeing tweens

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being themselves and reaching their potential."

WAM! breaks its programming down to three time slots: The Mind Zone from 3 a.m. to 3 p.m., which provides education that entertains, and the OH! Zone, WAM's after-school block starting at 3 p.m. The End Zone encompasses weekend programming, which consists of movies and other hit shows.

Thunderstone & the Tribe, about kids banding together after an apocalyptic virus wipes out everyone over 21, is a hit with this age group, as is *Caught in the Middle*, which follows eight freshmen at Mercer Island High outside Seattle, as they make the transition from middle to high school.

"Last year's debut marked the first time a camera crew spent a full year inside an actual high school," Pierce says.

"For years, children's television has talked down to kids and pandered to their worst instincts," Pierce explains. "Our interaction with tweens over the years has convinced us that kids crave substance, information and attention."

At Disney, the tween audience has made the new *Even Stevens* comedy a popular program, according to Rich Ross, Disney Channel general manager and executive vice president of programming and production. "Also, *Lizzie McGuire* just premiered and has done really nice business. The shows acknowledge that a tween [has] one foot in childhood, the other in teenhood."

Original series like *Jett Jackson* and *So Weird* are building their audiences. Ross points out that Disney unveils its new shows on weekends. Eventually, they air four or seven times a week.

"*Jett* was the first to do that, then *So Weird*," Ross says. "It's an opportunity to develop something appropriate for us and not depend on others to do it."

During Cartoon Network's Toonami, the weekday-afternoon action-adventure block that looks to grab tween boys, *Dragonball Z* is the top-rated program not only on Cartoon Network but across all ad-supported cable at 5 p.m., says Tim Hall, executive vice president.

"We're always trying to come up with a winning formula," Hall explains. "A few years ago, action *anime* [Japanese animation] came on strong. While it's not true *anime*, *Pokémon* got kids interested in *anime*."

Fox Family's big draws in the tween market also happen to attract the 6- to 11-year-olds: *Angela Anaconda*, *The Kids from Room 402* and the various shows featuring Mary-Kate and Ashley Olsen.

"We do know boys growing up navigate toward action adventure and prankster comedy," says Andryc. "And girls like characters, relationships and more meat to the story. It's been proven scientifically. If you're completely removed from what they do, it will be hard to develop a hit show for them."



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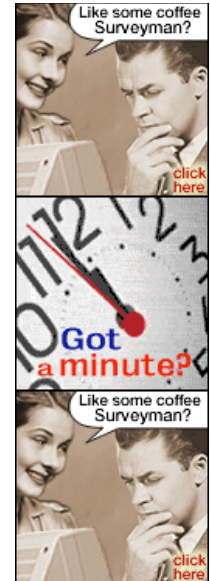
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