

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Variety Purpose Summit: Family, Faith-Based, Full Steam Ahead

Catherine · Tuesday, June 17th, 2014

The Variety Summit series of conferences has become an essential tool for those who want to have an up-to-the minute understanding of the topics they present. One of their more interesting offerings is the [Variety PURPOSE Summit](#), covering family and faith-based entertainment. Now in its third year, this event gathers the players and the pray-ers who are struggling to answer the question: How can anybody think that 150 million consumers comprise a niche market?

All day, two words echoed throughout the room – authenticity and integrity – and were established as the key elements of success in this market. [T.D. Jakes](#) added the most important element of all: intuition. You can be an authentic member of this market and operate with the utmost integrity to create uplifting content for the family and faith-based market. But if you don't have the intuitive instinct to know which project will resonate with the right audience, you probably won't have a home run on the screen.

Barbara Fisher, SVP of Original Programming at the [UP Network](#) believes that “the home runs are when a movie is for everybody.” Cable network UP currently reaches 70 million homes and is growing – a clear indication that this space offers a viable business model. INSP is another cable network making great strides in this market. INSP was designed to be “a network with a feeling of home.” Beginning with the idea of “lunge-free” content – meaning programs that never made you feel like you have to lunge for the remote to change it before something offensive comes on screen – they opted to build their network on syndicated content that was already out there. Their Nielsen ratings exploded in growth and in 2013 INSP grew faster than any other network. Rentrak rated INSP as 14th out of all the English language cable networks. Their next move was remarkably smart. Instead of building a lineup of new content on their network, they expanded their brand online through [moments.org](#). If the quality of the content on this site is indicative of what they will do in a longer format, we should all be looking forward to their next steps.



Mark Burnett planted a firm foothold on the religious television market with *The Bible*, his ground breaking series for The History Channel. The miniseries attracted more than 100 million viewers and earned three Emmy nominations. Now, he is preparing a sequel – *A.D.: Beyond the Bible* – for NBC. Brian Edwards, CEO of One Three Media (A Hearst and Mark Burnett Company), explained that they accomplished this task by defining their project as “family entertainment that you would watch with your kids” rather than faith-based or religious programming. Burnett focuses on

creating great quality content, as opposed to many of the opportunists who look at this space as a place to make a buck. “There is certainly, to some extent, a faith audience,” he explains, “but there is also just an audience.”

Variety struck a good balance of panelists – both content creators and audience builders were well represented – which made for an exciting conversation on the topic. While all independent filmmakers are challenged by their marketing budgets, the family and faith-based filmmakers are even more so. Their key to successful marketing is to find the people who know how to reach this specific audience with a very limited budget. Online marketing is growing in importance, but without that perfect trifecta – authenticity, integrity and intuition – even the best mounted campaign will fail to move the audience spending their time or money on the content.

Paul Lauer, Founder of Motive Entertainment, cut his teeth on the biggest faith-driven project of recent decades – *The Passion of the Christ*. Early in the process, he took Mel Gibson “on the road” to meet with religious leaders across the country. Gibson would show the clergymen some footage and solicit their input on how to improve the tiniest details of the project. He took it all under advisement and actually instituted many of the suggestions that were given. Years later, Lauer continues to adhere to the idea that “you still need to get the Rick Warrens of the world excited” – but he has expanded his outreach directly to the consumer. Lauer believes that “there is the right home for your film.” You may not know what that will be until you see the completed film, but “you have to find the people who are objective enough to help you figure out what the right home for that film will be.”

For the third year in a row, industry stalwart Ted Baehr presented the [Annual Movieguide Report](#) to the Entertainment Industry. His ongoing study demonstrates that year-over-year films that are rated G, PG and PG13 out-perform all other films at the box office. However, his conclusions show a lack of full understanding of the film business. He claims that since these projects are usually made for lower budgets than the R rated action/tentpole films, the profit margin is significantly greater, and this indicates a growth area on which the entertainment industry should capitalize; according to this report, only 4 of the top 25 box office successes of 2013 were rated R. Although some of his statistics are true, his analysis is wrong: Most if not all tentpole movies are PG-13, and that accounts for the reason they outperform R-rated films. Nor they are not made for lower budgets than R-rated films.

Anne Rudig, Director of Communications for The Episcopal Church, summed it all up: “People are looking for hope in this world.” Whether it is online, on television or in the theatres, artistic content that inspires and uplifts in an authentic way will find a larger audience than ever before.

Image from Son of God, released by 20th Century Fox

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