

TELEVISION channels can no longer be labelled as 'national' or 'foreign'. These days their scope has become international. To build such an image, TV channels undertake marketing and advertising of their own by introducing a 360-degree campaign through the print media, television, cinema (brand placements in films) and the Internet. A famous channel spends about Rs100 million only on outdoor advertising, and another Rs70 million annually. And for distribution purposes they pay huge carriage fees to cable operators.

What they get back in return is staggering as well. In India, the entertainment industry's revenues grew to Rs190 billion (\$4 billion) in 2003 compared to Rs166 billion (\$3.6 billion) in 2002. The Indian television industry is expected to grow at 20 per cent annually by 2007. In India, channel ad revenues grew by nine per cent in 2004. Out of this, one channel gets a 35 per cent share of the market (its ad growth coming in at between 20 and 25 per cent outpacing the market), followed by another channel that gets (20 per cent). While in Pakistan, advertising has grown 16 per cent in 2004 at Rs3.9 billion.

In Pakistan, there are several channels. We still have no channels for sports, comedy, fashion or consumer affairs. A surge in niche channels (regional languages) is also on the rise.

News and current affairs channels (24x7) are bound to be more successful in Pakistan, while the general entertainment ones are having a hard time in getting viewership loyalty. Here, infotainment gets top priority, thanks to a traditional male-

# Media battle

By Khalid Hasan Khan



Illustration by Agnia Fliaz

dominated society, geo-strategic dynamics, coupled with interest in volatile politics. Generally, our society that's not fond of reading suffers from information deficit. While fun and entertainment channels jumped into the fray without any study in viewers' demographics, being oblivious to cultural pluralism, low on

budget and heavy on concept theft from across the border, these channels give exact replicas or what we may call the painless plagiarism to their valued viewers. Entertainment channels were launched in haste by overlooking the media habits of the population. In this regard, head of research and

planning of BBC World, Jeremy Nye says: "Media consumption is a rich evolving science, which is chronically under-researched."

While entertainment in the form of tele-dramas, soap operas and comedy shows is something women-specific, the presence of Indian entertainment juggernaut has nearly steamrolled our 'mass entertainment genre' channels catering to pure entertainment. Again, poor preparation and reckless research made our media thinkers believe that copycat programming would yield benefits, disregarding the fact that India is a female-oriented society where being on the distaff side does matter.

**BEWARE OF IMITATION:** Many of our entertainment channels now rely on adaptations by producing different versions of Indian comedies, soaps or game shows, which in turn get their inspirations from western channels. Despite the glamour, the new trend of dialogue-driven programming is not well-taken at home. Frame-to-frame copy of many series runs parallel in many of our channels at a time. These entertainment channels are responsible for the herd mentality. Our channels are also far behind in horror and sci-fi programmes, as an animation industry is almost non-existent to match Indian counterparts.

Moreover, our channels are flogging the dead horse by undertaking more expensive and riskier genres like comedy and drama, which are the hardest hit these days as 77 per cent viewers tend to skip through ad breaks of such programmes, eventually channels lose ad revenues, on account of their 'commercial impacts'. Today, lifestyle and reality shows in particular are the programmes most likely to be watched

live and so continue to attract advertisers. And as they are cheaper and easier to make, they could well become more prevalent. For example, music has always been the least capital-intensive of the electronic media and therefore quite open to experimentation. Likewise, youth-based programmes, IQ shows, and shows for children are a rare breed. In short, the variety of content is missing from our own television channels. Simply because, as Dennis Norden says: "We don't want the television script good. We want it Tuesday." Our channels ignore the fact that 'content is king'. The point is: everyone knows that quality output comes at a particular price that we seem unwilling to pay.

News channels have their own learning curve in Pakistan. Being fast and zippy is not enough. Good content would drive the demand for these channels too. News channels get more viewership as people not watch them merely to catch headlines, but also because of their other non-fiction content. News channels attract male-targeted products and services. They try to suit brands, banking services, insurance and telecom sectors, which are skewed towards males.

For a news channel, it is the hardest task to win the loyalty of audiences before it moves towards the number one slot. An Indian media baron says: "The key thing in this business is to maintain your leadership position because in the media it is an established fact that the leader corners most of the revenue."

In a recent study, those defined as top management viewers watched BBC World for four hours 37 minutes per week; business decision makers (BDMs) for three hours 24 minutes; and overall view-

ers for two hours 58 minutes.

Only breaking news doesn't suffice. The worldwide trend is that news channels are becoming anchor-driven rather than news-driven, especially late-night talk shows. News channels need stylists, speech and diction trainers. They have to be more objective in content, enjoyable in presentation, and professional in performance.

We need an environment for independent media as the unifiers, not dividers, of society. At the same time, it is essential that the media becomes responsible in balancing out the truth with social sensitivity. However, our channels are way behind in nurturing a spirit of dialogue. They have to be non-threatening, non-judgmental, and should be concerned with feelings.

Nowadays, viewers have the facility of remote controls, which enables them to fast-forward or skip the shows that they don't want to watch. Many viewers use commercial breaks to channel surf — sometimes coming back to the original programme, sometimes not. According to a research, our channels have not yet undertaken experiments in "product integration", to turn this challenge into opportunity for the sake of viewer's delight, as technology is making traditional commercials obsolete. "So, if you grab attention in the first frame with a visual surprise, you stand a better chance of holding the viewer."

Despite the self-congratulatory habit, our channels seem to be running out of ideas and subjects, not to mention capable personnel to execute those ideas. Networks need research-rich content, investment in technical crew, training and technology, along with creativity and out-of-the-box thinking. ■