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MTV vs. Cartoon Network in the United States and Brazil

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Abstract

This paper emerged from conversations I had with employees at MTV Networks and Cartoon Network in spring and summer of 2003. To my surprise, I learned that MTV executives see Cartoon Network as a direct competitor for the 18- to 34-year-old viewer market domestically and abroad. Each company, however, has developed very different tactics for developing its brand outside the United States: MTV adapts content to local markets, while Cartoon Network makes few changes other than language translation. This paper describes both of these approaches, paying particular attention to the Brazilian market.

1. MTV Networks

MTV represents cutting-edge youth culture in the United States and abroad. The company invented the category of music video programming, and the MTV logo has developed iconic status worldwide. Globally, MTV has developed a strategy of localizing key aspects of its brand and product offering. In each country, MTV Web sites are customized by look, content, popular music, and local celebrities. More important, the programming mix, music and programs are developed with the host country's demographic in mind.

In the United States, this strategy has resulted in a move toward original programming over music videos. The company developed an alternative channel, MTV2, to air music videos, while MTV is the home to such original nonmusic programming as *Punk'd*, *Jackass* and *The Osbournes*. Globally, however, cutting-edge and rebellious music videos still dominate on MTV. In Latin American countries, music is so much a part of the culture that departing too far from music videos results in lower ratings. In these regions, original nonmusic programming is relegated to MTV2, while music videos rule MTV.

2. Cartoon Network

Despite its emphasis on animation, an area generally considered the domain of children, Cartoon Network is a key destination for 18- to 34-year-old viewers, making it a direct competitor to MTV. Increasingly, the channel's animated programs, such as *Samurai Jack* or the recent *Star Wars: Clone Wars*, have adult appeal. In the United States, viewer data bear out this audience overlap: adults in the 18–34 age group are approximately two and a half times more likely than the general population to watch 7 to 10 hours of MTV per week, while those same adults are almost twice as likely as the general population to watch 5 to 7 hours of Cartoon Network.¹ These networks are also considered competitors since they are both included with basic cable in the United States and many international countries.

¹ Simmons Market Research Bureau survey, 1999.

Cartoon Network's global branding strategy differs quite significantly from MTV's in that the programming content, logo and Web sites are virtually identical in each of its global markets. The only changes are for translation.²

3. Comparing MTV and Cartoon Network in Brazil

Brazil provides an interesting case study of how MTV and Cartoon Network have taken different approaches to localization in foreign markets. Until 1994, MTV Brazil had programmed mostly U.S. music videos, much like its European counterparts. This focus on largely mainstream American music was interpreted by Brazilian audiences as very alternative and underground, contributing to the perception of the brand as representative of cutting-edge youth culture.

The ratings did not support this direction, however, and as a result ad dollars were not forthcoming. In 1995, MTV Brazil executives revamped the channel to include much more Brazilian music and culture while maintaining the cutting-edge persona that the earlier version had enjoyed. While there was some criticism from the original viewership that MTV Brazil had sold out, the audience increased dramatically, allowing MTV Brazil to increase its ad dollars.³

From 1994 to 1995, revenues increased more than 75 percent, from 8.5 million reais (approximately U.S.\$8.75 million) to 15 million reais (approximately U.S.\$15.5 million). These increases have continued year over year; by 1997, revenues were 35 million reais (approximately U.S.\$33.4 million) (*Latin American Television* 1997).

While U.S. programming has evolved away from music videos on the main MTV channel, in Brazil the strong cultural ties to music and dancing reinforce the demand for music videos. Therefore, programs like *Jackass* and *The Real World* are reserved for the MTV2 digital channel. Even then, *Jackass* is one of the rare U.S. programs to make it to the Brazilian airwaves. Generally, MTV Brazil has had better success with its own style of irreverent programming, developed and produced locally. In fact, some of MTV Brazil's local programming has become so successful that other international MTV channels have borrowed its programming ideas and adapted them for their own countries.

MTV Brazil's localization of content is a contrast to Cartoon Network's standardized programming in Brazil. Other than translating the dialogue from English to Brazilian Portuguese, the cartoons are left unchanged.

² The one exception is Japan, which has a long tradition of anime and strong aesthetic preferences for large-eyed characters and pastel environments. While these attributes are in stark contrast to the varied characters and primary-color environments that dominate in the United States and elsewhere, without modifications for Japan's local tastes, Cartoon Network's viewership would likely drop dramatically.

³ MTV Brazil management (including Andre Mantovani and Christina Lobo), conversation with the author, May 30, 2003.

Despite the lack of localized content, Cartoon Network has been extremely successful in Latin America. In combined cable channel ratings of Brazil, Argentina, Chile and Mexico, Cartoon Network is ranked No. 1, while MTV is ranked No. 11 (*Multichannel News International* 2002).

This relationship is essentially reversed in the United States. MTV's programming regularly tops the ranking of the 25 most-watched cable programs, while Cartoon Network's programs are usually toward the bottom of the ranking.⁴ Since the adult 18–34 demographic is highly correlated to ad dollars, this reversal is also reflected in ad spending on the two networks. For 1997 ad dollar spending on the top 25 networks, MTV ranked 7th, while Cartoon Network came in at 23rd (*Brandweek* 1998).

4. Conclusion

Overall, the brand and product for both MTV and Cartoon Network have been efficiently adapted to local programming and Web site needs while maintaining their respective global brand attributes. Because programming content is received differently depending on the cultural context, the audience potential varies between countries, which is reinforced by the ad price and rating differentials of the networks in Brazil and the United States. Although MTV and Cartoon Network are rivals for the same audience, each network has successfully maximized its potential by respecting its audience's culture and understanding how its brand satisfies each audience's need.

⁴ Nielsen Media Research.

References

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