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Internationals Take the Stage

At NATPE Show, Overseas Sales Surge

By Chris Pursell

More international business was done at last week's NATPE market than the global contingent has seen in years, whether convention-goers were importing, exporting or developing their own projects.

"It seems like a shorter market this year, but we've been able to pack a lot into it," said Jon Helmrich, president of IBC, a U.S.-based global distribution company whose clients include CHUM Television from Toronto, Popular Arts Entertainment in Los Angeles and Rainbow Media's Voom HDTV in New York. "I've been seeing full schedules throughout the day, and considering how well we are doing in renewing our shows, I'd say it was the best NATPE in seven or eight years."

More than 132 international exhibitors flocked to the convention in Las Vegas, held by the National Association of Television Program Executives, providing a global flavor throughout the event.

Television deals and formatting are becoming more of a global import-export business than ever.

While American distributors were selling deals based on new hit series such as "Heroes" to outlets overseas, their international counterparts were busy taking meetings to sell formats, often of unscripted series, not only to the U.S. but to territories around the world.

Nationally, hit series derived from format sales range from unscripted fare such as "American Idol" and "Who Wants to Be a Millionaire" to sitcoms and dramas including "The Office" and "Ugly Betty."

The British came to NATPE with 12 companies, and the Koreans with 15. However, as in previous years, Canadians and Latin businesses flourished at the conference given the convention's proximity and timeframe.

"There was a terrific reception for our shows, which continued right through NATPE," said Tim Gamble, CEO of Canadian company Thunderbird Films, whose series include "Intelligence" and "DaVinci's Inquest." The producer is teamed with U.S. distributor Program Partners to sell the series Stateside.

"Our series are just now getting exposure in America and buyers are quickly finding out that they are working. That then helps us leverage the value of all our brands and helps shows get renewed," he said.

Some of the biggest deals out of the market involved Latin American territories.

MTV Networks Latin America, for example, announced that it has reached a deal with Endemol International to carry the U.S. version of its high-tech dating show "Exposed" which uses voice analysis to alert the show participant seeking a potential partner when candidates are lying, stressed, aroused or depressed. The network also announced that it will locally produce eight original episodes of the "Exposed" format, and that it will air new seasons of its popular dating game show "Next."

"We are always looking for innovative original content and formats that we can customize for our viewers in the region," said Jacqueline Cantore, vice president of programming for MTV Networks Latin America. "'Exposed' is a unique format that features embarrassing, surprising and funny situations that we are sure will be a hit with our young audience."

Meanwhile, Nickelodeon Latin America, a division of MTV Networks Latin America, signed a multi-year agreement with Mexico's Televisa Canal 5 for the exclusive broadcast rights of Nickelodeon Latin America's first original live action series, "Skimo." The Mexican broadcaster already airs several Nick series including "Unfabulous" and "SpongeBob SquarePants."

Many Latin distributors came to the market looking to sell formats of some of their telenovela series, but were disappointed in what one exhibitor described as "a reality craze" that saw larger companies such as FremantleMedia and Granada capitalize on the success of their own worldwide formats with series such as "The X Factor." Other companies came into the market looking not to buy product, but to create their own.

Maruchi Urquiga, General Project Director for MEXICANAL and senior VP of programming and production for Castilia, a company that provides Mexicans living in the U.S. with news and entertainment programming from their hometowns, said she came to NATPE looking for producers so that her companies would be able to broaden their own original production lineup.

The company also announced an agreement with Televisi%F3;n de Guerrero in Mexico to bring local Guerrero entertainment, news and sports to U.S. viewers. The deal represents the tenth Mexican region of programming shown to U.S. audiences on MEXICANAL.

"MEXICANAL continues to expand its U.S. audience by attracting new viewers whose roots or interests draw them to our unique regional programming," said Luis Torres-Bohl, MEXICANAL's president, during the NATPE convention. "The deal with Televisi%F3;n de Guerrero allows us to reach `Guerrerenses' in the U.S. and will contribute to the continued success of the channel."