

Canada embraces formats

Canada has never been a major player in the international trade of TV formats, instead consistently pumping out lifestyle and factual series, such as those being showcased at this week's Banff TV Festival. Gameshows have been almost non-existent on English-language channels, writes Jenn Kuzmyk.

In the past 12 months, however, that has all been changing. Conventional nets like CTV, Global and especially the CBC are really getting in on the action, as are speciality channels like Discovery Canada and Alliance Atlantis's new women's service Slice. As a result, nearly every Canuck production house is hunting for international factual, reality or game formats, or is developing its own format wares to shop around the world.



"From our point of view, the market has figured out how to make buying formats work," says Lisa Honig (left), FremantleMedia Enterprises' VP of programme distribution for North America. "The development of product integration and sponsorship has taken place in the last 18 months or so, and that has helped the format industry." She notes that the French-Canadian sector has been particularly involved in optioning international formats recently because they are not so tied to successful US and UK brands, and are willing to look at formats from other territories. Recent Fremantle format sales into Canada include Project Runway, which will air on Slice network.

Michael Geddes (below), president and CEO of Lone Eagle Entertainment (PopStars, Office Temps, The Call), feels that after decades of absence it's about time gameshows came back on to English-language television in Canada. "When you see primetime to some degree being taken over by gameshows in the US, the spillover is a natural effect in Canada," says Geddes.



The Toronto-based company is currently producing gamers like You Bet Your Ass for Canada's Comedy Network, and the second season of 65 episodes of iconic TV quizzer Inside the Box for Global's TVtropolis channel, where it appears as a nightly strip at 19.30. The format for the latter is now being shopped internationally by Outright Distribution in the UK.

Lone Eagle probably won't move to open an LA office any time soon, but

Geddes says he will continue to ramp up strategic relationships with key local American format and reality players, as the company has already done with Reveille.

Other concepts in development at Lone Eagle include The Slime That Men Do, a 'To Tell the Truth meets Truth or Dare' project based on a book by Canadian radio personality Howard Glassman (aka Humble Howard), and Take Back Your Age, where couples meet a team of life-changing doctors, nutritionists and naturopaths who help them try to reverse the aging process.



While experiencing success with Dragons' Den (left) and reviving its own archive shows like Front Page Challenge, Canada's CBC continues to option international formats with a vengeance. One of the latest is a commission for Paperny Films to make a local version of The Week the Women Went, a BBC3 social experiment doc that saw producers evacuate all women from a town for a week, just to see how the men would cope. The Canuck version is being filmed in the small Alberta town of Hardisty this spring for an early 2008 run on CBC.

Meanwhile, Paperny is at work on a second season of Glutton for Punishment, an 'extreme' culinary series for Food Network Canada and Fine Living USA, and another round of its Canadian 'road hockey' cross-country grudge match docusoap for Outdoor Life Network.

Tricon, a key player in the Canadian fact-ent and lifestyle business is also ramping up its format activities. The company's long-running reality-doc series Restaurant Makeover is now going into 78 episodes, and the format has been sold in the Netherlands, Belgium, France, Germany and Spain. Next, Tricon is expanding the concept into a new property, a chef makeover show. "We'll look at things like image style, food prep, the way to talk to customers, whether someone should be a chef at a fancy restaurant, a caterer, or maybe an instructor," says Tricon's Carrie Hall-Mudd.



Also in the works at Tricon, for Travel and Escape and Discovery Travel, is Life's a Trip (left). It sees Andrew Anthony (Matchmaker) travel the world taking on an extraordinary list of the things to do before you die, like going to Japan for a C\$700 steak, Cuba to face a fastball from the fastest pitcher in the world, or Iceland to find out if fairies really do exist.

Insight Productions is the Canuck reality TV powerhouse behind Canadian Idol, which is airing its fifth season in June. Like its stateside cousin, the show remains Canada's highest-rated television show in any genre. Keeping up the momentum, Insight has just started production on Project Runway for Alliance Atlantis's Slice network.

While also fully expecting to do more Deal or No Deal for Global in

Canada following this past winter's hit five-episode run, Insight is also in negotiations on at least five other international formats for adaptation in Canada, says frontman John Brunton. Meanwhile, the company is working closely with the likes of Fremantle and Endemol as it prepares to take its own original formats on to the world stage.

Other Canadian players in the emerging format sector include Proper Television, led by founder Guy O'Sullivan, which has been a pioneer in importing international factual formats into Canada, and distributor Oasis International. One of Oasis's first forays into formats was the acquisition of Keys To The VIP, a Comedy Network show from Buck Productions, which Oasis launched to the global market as a format in MipTV in April. The show "is the next generation in reality gameshows," says Peter Emerson, president of Oasis International.

The hidden-camera format is described as a "testosterone-fueled gameshow where the competition is hot and the girls are even hotter," pitting two self-styled pick-up experts in a head-to-head pulling contest, where their efforts to woo the opposite sex are marked by a panel of judges. Elements of the gameshow include trying to get a girl's phone number in less than a minute, and the overall winner gets a pocket full of girls' phone numbers and a night of exclusive VIP treatment with a bunch of beautiful women to party with.

Other formats on the Oasis slate include home repair show Completely Hammered (Whalley Abbey Media for W Network in 2003); Impossible Heists (Court TV); and 11 Cameras, a reality soap that takes a voyeuristic look at human relationships, told through the language of webcams and computer desktops.

This feature is part of a Canada special in the current issue of C21 International, rounding up the state of the indie production sector there, to coincide with this week's Banff TV Festival.

Jenn Kuzmyk
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