

Interview: Voom HD, cutting edge of tele programming

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Voom HD is the little network that's trying hard to push high-definition programming to the masses.

At one point they were struggling to get channel space, until EchoStar -- the folks behind DISH Network -- purchased a large stake in the company. Now a few months later Voom finds itself in a stronger position and recently announced the launch of 15 new HD channels that take niche content to new levels.

The new offerings include channels devoted to horror films, martial arts, video gaming and a live-music showcase. And the service is one of only a handful to broadcast in 100-percent high definition 24/7.

Last week UPI interviewed Greg Moyer, the general manager of VOOM HD NETWORKS, which produces content exclusively in HD for distribution in the United States through satellite and cable operators.

Q. How did you end up at Voom?

A. I was one of the earliest people at the Discovery Channel, and was 18th employer hired. In 1999 I moved to New York to take a job with Rainbow Media. What I enjoyed the most about Discovery was that I was able to travel the world to get great content. Voom gives me the sense of being on the cutting edge of technology and content. HD is as revolutionary as the introduction of color to the experience of watching television.

Q. About five years ago, this correspondent purchased a beautiful HDTV set, but there was no content available for it and to this day I have yet to actually watch anything in HD on it.

A. The actual sale of the sets outpaced the available content. This showed that people did want the larger sets with the wide angle screens and flat panel displays. They wanted the whole appearance and high performance of the sets but very little programming made. And still today, there isn't much content available for HDTV, that's why Voom HD is entering the market with so many different HD channels at one time. There aren't enough dependable sources of HD content.

Q. Which goes to my question of who is silly enough (besides me) to purchase an HD set at this stage? Do you think the delay of available content is impacting the sale of HD sets?

A. I think the reason hasn't been more HD content is that program producers don't have a unique HD revenue stream that would justify them converting from standard definition to HD production. Broadcasters have a firm federal mandate to upgrade their equipment to digital by 2009. If it was up to them they would stay with their current equipment until it broke. They aren't getting any more money from advertisers because they are putting out an HD signal. So, it was all expense without any revenue. Cable networks like Discovery was very friendly to HD because it's visually driven, but even then they weren't making any money off their programming, other than getting a little from the cable networks to be part of their HD tier of service.

Q. What is the cost differential between producing standard and HD programming?

A. Different people in the value chain would answer differently. On the production side, there's about a 10-25 percent premium to produce in

HD. So a \$100 show would cost about \$125 to produce in HD. But that price is coming down as the equipment gets cheaper, it's now closer to the 10-percent range. The bigger expense is being borne by the broadcast stations who have to rebuild their studio infrastructure -- buy new transmitters, cameras, broadcast facilities, etc. which is a much more expensive upgrade. At the Discovery Channel all we had to do was purchase new cameras and editing equipment.

Q. What do you think of the next generation of gaming systems, and what impact do you think the PS3 and Xbox 360 will have on HD television sales?

A. I believe that the 360 and PS3 will be an extraordinary compelling driver to get people to purchase HD sets because the passion around gaming is extremely high. It also becomes an excuse for dad to do something nice for the family and buy the "kids" an HD set for their new systems. It's another great example of how content is going to catch up and push HD in the market. As it relates to Voom, we announced this year the launch of GameplayHD, an HD channel devoted to video gamers.

Without being critical of our competitor, G4 is trying to become a men's channel and moving away from being a video game channel. We thought that there was an editorial opportunity to fill that space. You are going to see the best gamers in the world, playing games in HD.

Q. The picture quality was truly amazing.

A. It would have been an interesting idea to launch Gameplay a few years ago. But now it's absolutely compelling television. The realism of the virtual worlds that are being created for Xbox and Playstation is as good as a movie today. It's just like watching ESPN for live sports.

Q. It seems like the network is geared towards the male demographic, but there is some stuff on there that I'd watch. Who is the audience for Voom?

A. On the one hand it's a study in contradictions. We are trying to appeal to a broad family audience by having channels that appeal to different segments. For instance, we have an Anime channel that will appeal to 8-year-olds, to Ultra -- our fashion and beauty channel. We know the bulk of the decision makers who will purchase an HD set are male, so a preponderance of our channels are geared towards that demographic. We hope that across the spectrum everyone in the family will have at least two channels that they would call their favorites. We're fortunate to have a partner in EchoStar who has given us the bandwidth to do this. An HD set will be a family purchase, since it will be in the family room.

Currently most of the channels broadcasting in HD aren't doing it on a 24/7 basis.

Dish recognized that the initial tier of HD was not robust enough to make it as a mainstream content offering. So that's why they wanted to partner with us.

Q. I'm really big on alternative, homegrown programming and think that's where the real competitive offering will be. It seems like Voom also agrees with this. That instead of offering the same old programming, only in HD, you are trying to build more niche stations where you can do more experimenting.

A. We are moving away from a mass-media age to more of niche programming. In the past we only had a couple of magazines now we have more than 5,000. We used to only have three or four television networks, now we have over 200. So we're moving away from mass organizations to having dedicated portals. So Voom is trying to build

communities around these niches.

Q. Do you plan on utilizing the Internet to build large scale online communities around these channels?

A. Yes, we are in talks with several major online players to brand our individual networks. We hope to have some major announcements regarding Gameplay and Monsters in the coming months.

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