

Higher expectations for digital media at NewFronts

April 28 2013, by Jake Coyle



This undated image released by Columbus 81 Productions shows comedians Jerry Seinfeld, left, and Michael Richards, former co-stars in the popular comedy "Seinfeld," in a scene from the finale of Seinfeld's web series, "Comedians in Cars Getting Coffee." The Digital NewFronts will run Monday through Friday, as media companies like Google, Hulu and Vevo make presentations of their upcoming programming to advertisers in New York. Crackle, the Sony Pictures Entertainment digital network, is expected to promote the second season of Jerry Seinfeld's Web series "Comedians in Cars Getting Coffee." (AP Photo/Columbus 81 Productions)

Last year, the inaugural Digital NewFronts didn't skimp on the hype.

Google, Hulu, Yahoo and others made brash, glitzy presentations to advertisers trumpeting their ascendancy in a rapidly changing media landscape. Even Jay-Z dropped by.

There will be plenty of the same this week in New York at the second Digital NewFronts, the digital world's take on the annual TV "upfront" tradition. But ahead of this year's five-day-long overture to Madison Avenue, the talk is of both the great progress of digital entertainment and unrealized promises.

"It was absolutely a learning experience," Doug McVehil, [senior vice president](#) of content and programming for the music video destination Vevo, says about last year's NewFronts. "I know there's some things we can do better this year both at the presentation itself and in terms of follow-up. But we're all fairly new at this. This is a young thing for the digital media industry."

In 12 months' time, the industry has come a long way. Netflix's first major original series, "House of Cards," proved that streaming video can compete with the most prestigious cable programs. [Google's YouTube](#) rolled out its 100-plus funded channels in a bid to bring higher quality videos (and thus advertisers) to its platform. One of the biggest TV stars, Jerry Seinfeld, launched a handsome [Web series](#), "Comedians in Cars Getting Coffee."

But some of the digital series touted last year have disappointed. Although Yahoo's "Bachelor"-spoof "Burning Love" has proved a modest hit, its Tom Hanks animated sci-fi series, "Electric City," didn't live up to its creator's reputation. While the top YouTube channels have grown considerably, several of its star-driven efforts have fizzled.

"Last year, there were some big promises about not only the quality but the volume of shows that people are going to make," says Eric Berger,

executive vice president of digital networks for [Sony Pictures](#) TV, which owns the [video site](#) Crackle. "If you look back over the course of the year, as we talked to brands and agencies, there're some questions about quality and about the volume of things that were actually produced."

Crackle didn't participate in the NewFronts last year but will this year. It will be promoting, among other shows, an upcoming second season of Seinfeld's series.

Naturally, growing pains are inevitable, especially when so much is changing so fast. The wide array of NewFront presenters this year exhibits the evolving nature of media companies.

New presenters include The Wall Street Journal and Conde Nast, both venerable publishers known for their print products. But Conde Nast earlier this year launched online series slates for two of its magazines (GQ and Glamour), with plans to do the same for its other properties, including Vanity Fair and The New Yorker. The Journal, more than any other newspaper, has developed live video programming with its "WSJ Live" app.

"The Journal has really transformed itself since News Corp.'s acquisition into a complete content provider and not just business, finance and economics," says Michael Rooney, chief revenue officer for The Journal, explaining its entry to the NewFronts. "The world still needs to learn and understand about that and what we have to offer."

Yahoo will come into its presentation on the heels of acquiring the rights to archival clips to all 38 years of "Saturday Night Live." YouTube recently announced that in May it will begin a series of theme weeks to highlight its premium channels, starting with comedy. On Sunday night, Vevo will kick off the fourth year of its flagship program "Unstaged," a concert live stream. (Vampire Weekend will perform with Steve

Buscemi directing the webcast.)

Performances will play a big part of Vevo's presentation, with appearances by Carly Rae Jepsen, Kendrick Lamar and Jessie Ware. But McVehil says at this year's NewFronts, brands want more than a good show.

"As we mature, I think it's going to be about people looking hard at real numbers and performance and judging companies based on that more than how sexy their presentation was," McVehil says.

Some companies are going it alone. NBCUniversal's digital division, having been a part of the NewFronts last year, held a separate event in New York last week, as did the gaming network Machinima. The talent agency CAA will preview its clients' digital projects this week, but not in an official NewFront.

Still, there are close connections for several of the 18 media companies in the NewFronts. Disney Interactive has several YouTube channels and in February partnered with Vevo to produce family friendly music content.

Ad agency Universal McCann predicted deals at the NewFronts could reach \$1 billion. That's still a fraction of what broadcast upfront presentations pull in, but few don't expect digital media to continue to increase their share of the advertising pie.

"We're bigger this year, both in terms of the scope of the event and the amount of content," says Mark Walker, senior vice president of Disney Interactive Entertainment. "We had a few programs before and some speculation. Now, we have conclusively demonstrated that there's a robust audience demand for the kind of high quality video content that we're producing."

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