

It's, like, a teen thing

By David Hiltbrand

If your television could talk, it might fill you in on the real generation gap in this country the gulf between what teenagers like on TV and what everyone else is watching.

An analysis of ratings information for the current TV season shows that teens have distinctive viewing habits. In fact, 14 of the top 25 shows among 12- to 17-year-olds are nowhere to be found among the top 25 shows for all viewers. Nearly half of the most popular teen shows air on Fox.

And the epidemic of reality programming? To a great extent, you can blame it on teens. They can't get enough of the tawdry stuff. Shows such as *American Idol* are helping arrest a precipitous decline in network ratings among adolescents.

Above all, teens like to laugh. Comedies account for more than half of their top 25. Only three dramas made it onto the teen list: *CSI* (No. 12), *Smallville* (17), and *7th Heaven* (20).

The overall top 25 -- a list dominated by adult choices -- is far more sober, laden with 10 dramas, from *CSI* (No. 1) to *JAG* (No. 24). Those longer shows may help explain why grown-ups watch far more TV than young folks do.

As for reality shows, they hold down three of the top four slots for the teen group. Those viewers' appetite for such programming extends to such otherwise marginal offerings as *Fear Factor* (No. 14 for teens) and *Celebrity Mole: Hawaii* (24). These shows rank 32d and 46th with the overall audience. Last week, the younger audience for *Fear Factor* boosted NBC to its first victory over an original episode of CBS's *Everybody Loves Raymond* (No. 9 with all ages) in nearly four years.

What accounts for this disparity in viewing tastes?

Clearly, it is in part a matter of age. But today's teens are also growing up in a far more tried and alluring entertainment environment than previous generations -- a world offering endless video games, the Internet, and hundreds of cable channels.

As a result, says Betty Frank, executive vice president of research for MTV Networks, "they're used to getting what they want when they want it. So they're impatient. They move around a lot. They have short attention spans."

The limited duration of reality series, which typically last between four and 11 weeks, enhances their teen appeal. "They're almost like a novella," says Shari Anne Brill director of programming services for Carat, a media advisory firm. "They're stories with a quick beginning, middle.: and end."

Another reason reality series perform well with younger viewers is that the shows usually resolve around dating or contestants' being voted off. Issues of relationships and rejection resonate with teens.

The network of choice among adolescents is Fox, which airs the season's six most popular shows for that age group. One week during the recent February sweeps period. Fox had all 10 of the highest-rated shows among teens.

"Fox has a fix on younger viewers," says John Rash, director of broadcast negotiations at Campbell Mithun advertising agency. "That helped propel them to a solid sweeps victory with a younger audience, and bodes well demographically for their future."

According to Gail Berman, Fox's president of entertainment, the key to the network's success isn't just programming content. It's also attitude, a hyperactive, class-clown approach most evident in promos for shows such as *Joe Millionaire*.

"We view ourselves as the alternative, irreverent network," Berman says. "And that's very appealing to teens."

The disparity between younger and older viewers is so pronounced that only one traditional scripted series, *Friends*, ranks in the top 10 for both teens and the overall TV audience.

That's a remarkable accomplishment for the NBC sitcom, given that its creators and executive producers, Marta Kaufmann and David Crane, say they pay no attention to demographics.

"I have kids," Kaufmann says. "They're good barometers. But I rarely think of them when we're working on an episode." Adds Crane: "Maybe the shows that try to attract younger demos are working too hard to accomplish that. If you set out to be hip, you're going to be anything but."

Though teens are quick on the draw with a remote in hand, when they do find a program they like, they tend to form strong and lasting bonds.

"They're real 'appointment' viewers, tuning in week in and week out," Fox's Berman says. "A show becomes an emotional experience for them, and an emotional commitment."

Yet, for the teen-targeting networks -- notably Fox, the WB, and UPN -- that very loyalty poses a problem.

"You really have to be on your toes if you're the adopted network for that age group," says Tom Bierbaum, NBC's director of ratings. "You can't put on a show and leave it there for 10 years, because the bulk of your audience starts aging out of your demographic. You have to keep recruiting from the bottom end of the teen spectrum."

The difficulty of refreshing a young audience is exemplified by *Beverly Hills 90210*. The series aired for nearly a decade on Fox, thanks to devoted fans who grew a little older with each season. But their younger brothers and sisters never adopted Brenda and Dylan.

A recent casualty of that aging process is *Dawson's Creek* on the WB.

"It was huge out of the box with teen viewers," says Mary Hall, the network's senior vice president of research. "The teens that started with it stayed with it. But we haven't gotten a load of new teens." As a result, *Dawson's Creek* will have its finale on May 14, after five seasons. (It doesn't help that star James Van Der Beek is starting to look older than Fox News' Bill O'Reilly.)

The exception to this trend is the WB's *7th Heaven*, which owes its evergreen popularity among teens to its premise. In the sprawling Camden family, there's always a new kid to showcase.

"When the show started, it was all about Matt [Barry Watson] and Mary [Jessica Biel]," Hall says. "Now it's Simon, played by David Gallagher. He's the hot teen idol. That's how they're able to reload the teen pipeline."

Another difference between younger and older viewers is the way they use the TV.

If you're an adult who grew up with only a handful of stations, you're hemmed in by an invisible fence. Research has repeatedly shown that mature viewers subconsciously stay among the channels with the lowest numerical assignments.

Teens know no such borders. "The younger you are, the more aware _you are of the channels that aren't at the bottom of the dial," NBC's Bierbaum says. "Kids are more likely to be zapping up and down the whole cable spectrum."

Partly as a result, prime-time network viewership among teens dropped during the last seven seasons by nearly two million, to a 3.2 million nightly average last season, according to Nielsen Media Research. However, that audience is projected to increase slightly this season, thanks largely to the "reality" boom.

The broadcast networks still run the biggest game in town. The prime-time audiences for the Cartoon Network, Nickelodeon and MTV -- the three most popular cable channels among 12-to-17-year-olds -- averaged less than 170,000 teen viewers each during the February "sweeps." In comparison, Fox's *American Idol* is averaging 2.7 million teens per episode this season.

The most sought-after age group for advertisers - because of its disposable income and free-spending ways - has always been 18- to 49-year-olds. But in certain product categories -- movies, soda and cosmetics, to name a few -- teens are highly prized.

First, though, you have to get them to tune in.

Not only are younger viewers resistant to traditional network offerings, they also watch much less TV than adults.

According to a recent leisure-time study conducted by MTV Networks, 12- to 17-year-olds devote an average of 20 to 22 hours a week to TV viewing. Adults ages 18 to 49 average 32 hours in front of the set. And viewers 50 and older watch the most of all: 42 hours a week.

The elusiveness of teens only makes them more desirable to sponsors.

"There's an ironic inverse relationship," NBC's Bierbaum says. "If you watch less, you become more valuable, because the networks have to work harder to deliver you to the advertisers."

Another reason teens get special attention from the networks is that they're trendsetters.

"Oftentimes they are the first adopters of a programming breakthrough," Bierbaum says. "For instance, 10 years ago teens really took to *The Real World* on MTV. Now they're 25 and likely to be watching reality programming. They're great detectors."

When one of the older-skewing networks does put on a show that hits with young people, the effects on its audience composition can be dramatic. "When *Survivor* came on the air," MTV Networks' Frank says, "people were shocked because it immediately lowered CBS's median age by several years - probably a whole generation."

One facet of teen viewing should hearten parents: Among 12- to 17-year-olds' 25 most popular shows this season, only one, ABC's *Celebrity Mole: Hawaii*, has begun after 9 p.m. So, presumably, at least teens are getting enough sleep.

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