

Comedy Central Dismantles Its Digital Wall

By Sam Thielman The cable network is adapting to viewer preferences in an effort to make content and ads flow across multiple screens. And while it's all systems go, will clients go along for the ride?

Can a network merge its digital unit with the rest of the corporate structure? Comedy Central thinks it can—today, the network is announcing it's done exactly that. The next question, of course, is how the agency and client worlds will react.

"We basically dismantled the department formerly known as digital," said Michele Ganeless, president of the network. "We had a digital team that made digital content and digital marketing and scheduled the digital platforms, and then ... we realized that our audience doesn't think of it that way. And we shouldn't, either."

Accordingly, David Bernath is now evp, programming and multiplatform strategy, and Walter Levitt is now CMO. (Kent Alterman became president, content development and original programming earlier this year.) Across the network, among employees who manned Twitter feeds or posted fan art to Facebook accounts, Ganeless said, "Everyone who was speaking directly to our viewers now works in marketing."

But how does all this work with an agency world that is still to some extent siloed into digital and linear groups? Gibbs Haljun, managing

director, media investment at GroupM, says it should work pretty well given that most agencies are already requiring their digital and linear divisions to work closely.

"Everybody, regardless of whether the groups are separate or not, has to work closely together," said Haljun. "You're going to have video that lives on three different plans. It's going to



Truthiness is platform agnostic.

live on print in my iPad editions, it's going to live on TV, and it's going to live on digital video."

Naturally, it behooves a network that targets the 18-34 demo keep up with the times. Nielsen decided back in February to redefine what constituted a TV watching household and began including connected TV viewing. It's commonly understood that the taxonomy is the only factor preventing Nielsen universe estimates from declining a third consecutive year. Young viewers now consider linear cable one option, rather than the optimal way to consume, and Ganeless says it's a bad idea to fight viewer preference.

"We centralized all of what we're calling platforming but is actually scheduling-on-different-platforms," Ganeless said. "Comedy travels well."

Of course, certain content types travel better than others, and the team will be trying to where each thing works best in the coming months. On the ad sales side, the change has been in effect for a while, and Jeff

Lucas—head of sales for music and entertainment groups for MTV Networks—said his team are able to identify ideal content across devices. "The main screen can be on a tablet or on a phone," he told Adweek.

"We will be in a great position when measurement catches up, but right now we can monetize on any screen," Lucas said.

Of course, that does mean a lot more work for Lucas' team. The group tailors key performance indicators from preferred third parties to every client. Digital natives, Lucas notes, prefer comScore VCE; TV vets tend to favor the guarantees afforded by Nielsen OCR.

"It's complicated," Haljun admitted. "But it's also part of the wave of the future."

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