Love those chocolate cookies

BY WALTER LEVITT

It's the phrase that makes me want to scream every time I hear it:

"Brands don't matter in TV—people just watch shows"

Ah yes, the overly simplistic view of our business. Put on a great show, viewers will find it, flock to it every week, and advertisers will follow with their wallets wide open.

If only it were that simple.

One only has to look to other fragmented, complex and cluttered product categories to see that brands play a critical role in consumer decision-making—and to understand why brands are now more important than ever in our business.

Wired magazine, in an issue dedicated to the new TV universe, claimed that in a typical digital household with 300 channels, a viewer has over three MILLION shows to choose from each year.

THREE MILLION CHOICES!

So how do viewers wade through the clutter and make choices?

Those are the times where TV brands can play a critically important role.

Consumers are easily paralyzed by an over-abundance of choice—and they need marketers help making decisions. Imagine if you walked into the cookie aisle of your favourite grocery store and were greeted by hundreds of white packages in various shapes and sizes that were all labelled simply Chocolate Cookies. How would you choose what to buy? You'd probably stand in front of the aisle for a few seconds, dumbfounded—and, I suspect, quickly decide you can live without cookies and high-tail it over to the cereal aisle instead.

But, thankfully, there are brands like Oreos and Chips Ahoy and PC Decadent to help us decide how we want to indulge in our guilty cookie pleasure. In the face of huge choice, consumers need help making decisions—and, typically, brands help making choices easier.

That experience is no different in the TV business. TV brands help viewers cut through the clutter of millions of shows. Without brands they know and connect with, consumers often wouldn't know where to start their viewing.

Of course, decision-making is never based on one factor. There is typically a decision set—that is, we are all constantly narrowing-down our choices based on a wide variety of factors. "I want to indulge myself by buying something that isn't good for me, but that I will enjoy eating. OK, so let's buy something chocolate. I think I'll buy chocolate cookies—they always taste good. Let me go to the neighbourhood Loblaws to buy them since I also have to buy a few other groceries. OK, here I am in the cookie aisle. I've tried a bunch of these different chocolate cookies in my lifetime. I like a lot of them. But I think that those PC Decadent cookies are the highest quality. I think they use real chocolate in them—I heard that somewhere once. Oh, and I see they are on sale. OK, let me grab that package." By my count, about seven or eight factors that went into making that very simple decision.

Choosing what to watch on TV is no different. When a viewer sits down with a remote, their decision about what to watch is complex. It's likely a combination of things like the mood they are in, the kind of show they feel like watching, whether one of their appointment shows is on, what TV brands are top-of-mind, what brands they connect with, the channel positions they are most used to turning to—not to mention what shows are actually on when they turn on the set.

Like the cookie aisle, TV in 2008 has too much choice for viewers to wade through on their own. And they need our help—or we will lose them. That's why I believe one of the best ways to help them with that choice is by building defining TV brands—brands that deliver on a set of expectations, that help cut through the clutter and confusion, brands that viewers connect with emotionally and that help consumers more easily make viewing decisions.

As the TV universe gets more complex and fragmented, it's become about much more than just putting great shows on the air. The bigger your network brand, the bigger your chances for success.

Just call it the "chocolate chip cookie factor".

Walter Levitt is Chief Marketing Officer at Canwest Broadcasting where he oversees consumer marketing for Global, E! and 20 specialty channels. He also loves chocolate chip cookies. He may be reached by e-mail at WLevitt@canwest.com.