

BY MICHELLE DACRUZ

If you got spanked last night, Showcase wants to know. They might even send a confessional on wheels, TV crew and all, to record your testimonial.

It's all part of the specialty network's new, provocative advertising campaign. The ads include office clerks declaring their homosexuality for a day, a grandmother with a potty-mouth and — perhaps the most risqué of all — two seniors in bed with the caption, "Showcase is our safe word."

Is the network, owned by Alliance Atlantis Communications Inc., in danger of alienating or offending potential viewers? The company seems willing to take that risk.

"We didn't go into this campaign assuming it would be to everyone's taste, and we respect and appreciate that," said Walter Levitt, senior vice-president of marketing and creative services. Mr. Levitt concedes the campaign has elicited some "minor" complaints.

Alan Middleton, a marketing professor at York University's Schulich School of Business, said that in today's cluttered world, the Showcase ads aren't necessarily shocking, but instead are an "intrigue" campaign that does its job to get your attention.

Mr. Middleton said the ads are effective because the theme — pushing personal boundaries — is relevant to the Showcase brand.

"Shock alone is a vastly overrated strategy, and it only works if the shock is directly related to the product," he said.

Mr. Levitt argues that for Showcase, whose motto is television without borders, it simply wouldn't make sense to generate advertising that didn't push boundaries.

The television, print and outdoor advertising spots were developed in-house by the broadcaster's creative team who carry out similar tasks for the firm's 12 other wholly-owned digital and analogue specialty networks.

"It's a nod and a wink to our viewers. It's a campaign to remind viewers what it is they love about Showcase," said Mr. Levitt. Subscribers to the specialty channel, which will be 10 years old next year, are hovering at about six million.

Mr. Levitt would not disclose the cost of the campaign, but said it's the "most substantial advertising investment" Alliance Atlantis has made in the channel in about four years.

"We take chances and provide programming and content that is outside of what you typically find on television," he said.

The channels top-rated shows include the gritty prison drama *Oz*, which depicts graphic scenes of sex and drug abuse; *Six Feet Under*, a series that takes place in a family-run funeral par-

lour; *Kink*, a documentary series about sexual fetishes, and the *Red Shoe Diaries*, an erotic drama series.

Mr. Levitt said specialty television is "fundamentally different" from conventional. Viewers develop emotional connections with specialty channels, much as they do with magazines, he said.

"The objective in marketing specialty is really about having one of your channels be their favourite. If they watch it, they will automatically go to your channel and see what's on."

The Toronto-based broadcaster last year shuttered its television and filmed production business with the exception of the wildly profitable *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation* franchise, which it co-produces with Viacom Inc.'s CBS.

Since it narrowed its business profile, the company has stirred Bay Street interest, and Alliance Atlantis shares have appreciated from \$18 in January to nearly \$29. Tim Casey, an analyst with BMO Nesbitt Burns, forecasts double-digit profit growth over the next couple of years for its broadcast division.

Its newest offerings, the handful of digital channels it launched in late 2001, while yet to turn a profit, are the top rated in the categories most sought by advertisers, people 25 to 54 and 18 to 49. Showcase Action, for instance has reached the one-million viewer mark.

However, Dennis Dinga, vice-president of broadcast-buying firm M2 Universal Communications, said the ratings aren't what they should be.

The digital channels, he said, are all facing the same difficulty: lack of recognition.

"The problem for all these dignets is the same: they didn't market themselves properly. I would bet a large portion of the Canadian public doesn't even know these channels exist. They didn't market themselves at all. Except for the free previews, but if you didn't have digital or satellite what are you previewing?"

Mr. Dinga said the reason for the limited success of Showcase Action is that it manages to appeal to women as well as men.

Mr. Levitt's view is more positive. He said the company's digital channels "have huge audiences, considering that some of them are in the early development stage."

Doug Checkeris, head of the Media Company, a Toronto-based media buyer, said Alliance Atlantis has found the right model for its digital channels to keep its costs low.

"You sure wouldn't want to be a stand-alone dignet with a lot of foreground costs," he said.

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I used the F-word today.

Thanks Showcase!

Every day countless people push their personal boundaries. If we helped, even just a little, you're welcome.

Showcase - saluting boundary pushers everywhere.

SHOWCASE
TELEVISION WITHOUT BORDERS

A poster from the current advertising campaign for Showcase.

Slightly outrageous campaign promotes channel that claims to be television without borders

Showcase ads pushing boundaries