

# COMEDY IS SERIOUS BUSINESS

Although he's in comedy, he insists he's not *that* funny. But Walter Levitt is definitely a stand-up marketer with a lot to say about the craft. Me & My Brand caught up with him to talk about the transition from Canwest in Toronto to Comedy Central in New York City, fan engagement and why marketers need to market themselves better in the C-suite

ME & MY  
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*By David Thomas / Photography by Lee Towndrow*

Walter Levitt divides his time between Toronto and Manhattan. I've invited him to drop in on a Friday morning to catch up because that's when he's in town, ahead of the weekend when he gets to hang out with his wife and three kids between the ages of 11 and 16.

After cutting his chops in radio, Levitt moved up the ladder at CTV and Alliance Atlantis before climbing into the top marketer role at Canwest. The first question I throw at him is from 10,000 feet: what has been the most dramatic contrast between a career in Canadian broadcast and driving value as chief marketing officer at Viacom's powerful comedy brand over the past three years?

**LEVITT** *Easy, it's the scope. Comedy Central from a revenue point of view is larger than all of the broadcast business at Canwest. And it's a brand that crosses over every category and platform. TV clearly is still the biggest revenue driver but we are in every digital business imaginable and partner with every partner in that space imaginable. We're in the consumer products business, we're in the radio business. Any place that comedy hits, we are there. So as a marketer it's been an incredible opportunity to come in and manage a brand that's truly multiplatform. I don't think that opportunity quite exists, certainly not in the media sector, in Canada.*

One of the skills that has served him well is an ability to multitask and he insists this is a real advantage Canadian marketers take with them into senior roles with larger American companies. It's the breadth of experience that often comes with broader responsibilities in a smaller market. (This is something that Levitt had a lot to share about, read more with our Canada Day package which starts on P.58.) Multitasking was a necessity at Canwest where he was responsible for optimizing a large portfolio of broadcast brands. It was a bit of



juggling act to balance news, documentaries and entertainment alongside the promotion of soft core porn on Showcase. I ask him how as a marketer he best added value in that role.

**LEVITT** *It was a case of how do you continue to grow the brands with growth potential and manage the costs on those that didn't. And how do you make them all work together. I was actually leading a lot of portfolio evaluations at that business. A lot of the changes we made around buying, selling, rebranding, moving stuff around, deals that we did with media companies globally came out of those reviews. That's a very business-focused approach.*

Here is what success might look like: First, identify an underperforming specialty channel. Second, shuffle a few channel assets around. Third, secure some U.S. content where advertisers have demonstrated strong interest; and fourth, negotiate better carriage to give it a wide footprint. An example of that in action was creating a new lifestyle channel called DIY, which was a major success right out of the gate. So, here is a question: Is that even marketing? Good business strategy? Both?

**LEVITT** *That question goes to the core of the sometimes misunderstood view of what a CMO is and what marketing is in general. As marketers, we've gained a reputation over the years as being the ones who do those really fancy ads that we have to go to South Africa to shoot. And throw great lavish parties. Everyone loves that. It's exciting but it's only one piece of the marketing mix. CMOs in many respects have one of the best seats in the house to figure out how to grow a business because they are not so typically caught up in the all the internal day-to-day stuff. They're more focused on the consumer. The best marketers are really business builders at their core.*

This issue of the unappreciated role of marketing is one Levitt has championed in his term as chairman of the Canadian Marketing Association. I'm curious whether he thinks CMOs are making any headway in gaining recognition for the value they bring.

**LEVITT** *I think in many companies, unfortunately, marketers have become the people who do the ads. It's a disservice to the profession. If you go back to the old days of Procter & Gamble, which is considered the greatest marketer of all time, marketers always owned the brand's P&L. In that case, marketers are really business leaders and frankly that's how it should be.*

Okay, that's a good cue to talk about what he's been able to do at Comedy Central. The brand is as focused as ever on the target 18-34 year-old male comedy lover, but I want to learn how he has helped focus the strategy around the core brand message.

**LEVITT** *We have a hugely successful business and nobody wants to mess with it, but there were different businesses operating in a bit of a vacuum. It struck me how much we were thinking old school. We knew the relationship of young guys to comedy is like no generation before. Young guys say their taste in comedy actually says more about them than their favourite sports team and even their religion. And they love to share comedy clips because it says a tonne about them. So we had all this insight and yet we still thought of ourselves as a TV network with brand extensions. One of the first things we tackled after I got there was to establish: What strategically does and should the brand stand for? We're a comedy brand that provides content for guys, no matter where they're looking at it.*

Obviously, there are a lot of places guys can go to view content and it's safe to say all of them are harder to monetize than cable TV. I'm curious how much Levitt has wrestled with positioning for eyeballs and engagement when revenue, never mind actual margin, is completely absent.

**LEVITT** *We decided that if we looked at non-linear TV stuff as a side business, that's maybe great now and in a year or two. But not great long term. We don't want to be another BlockBuster. Our strategic shift was huge and has driven a lot of what we've done structurally here too. We've gotten rid of divisions, like digital. As for building a fan base where there is no revenue, you can't be afraid. You have to do it and if you don't take those leaps, your core business is going to change and erode. A great example is YouTube. We are not currently making a penny off what we do on YouTube and yet Comedy Central has upwards of 500 million views in the last two years. It's an enormous, enormous success. If our content is not there, millennials will watch other content.*

The way Levitt describes the org structure at Comedy Central, it boils down to three buckets or teams, each defined by how it interacts with content. One **develops** it, another **platforms** it and the third **markets** it. His marketing group has four subgroups—strategic brand marketing, which works with agencies on media planning and buying plus running events; fan engagement for social; creative, with a creative director for each franchise/show; and production/operations, which tackles logistics and original shoots. In our discussion, Levitt keeps using the word fan, never “viewer.” It's like anyone in retail these days, using the word guest, never “customer.” I ask him to explain the thinking.

**LEVITT** *Consciously, we use very different language now. I've become a bit like the language police because I won't let people talk about our network or our audience or our shows. We are a brand that has franchises and fans. When you talk about creating loyal fans who are emotionally connected, not just*



## ME & MY BRAND



### WALTER LEVITT ON HOW CANADIAN PROGRAMMING STACKS UP AGAINST THE AMERICAN COMPETITION:

"Original drama and comedy is hard to do and expensive. Canada doesn't always have the budget to do it at the level that would compete visually but there've been great examples: Rookie Blue, Flashpoint, Saving Hope..."

### WALTER LEVITT ON 'MY OFFICE WILL CALL YOUR OFFICE' NETWORKING CULTURE IN L.A.:

"As a humble Canadian, it's been a bit overwhelming at times, but people who have successful relationships in Hollywood are hugely, hugely valuable. Here, if I needed to get in touch with Debbie Travis about something I call Debbie Travis and say 'Hey, Debbie, it's Walter. What's up?'"

*eyeballs who watch your TV shows, it changes pretty fundamentally the way you think about the business.*

Right, using other language, if you were a portfolio marketer with Canwest, are you a franchise director marketer now, with *Inside Amy Schumer*, *South Park*, *The Daily Show*, *Drunk History*, *Brickleberry* etc. being the franchises?

**LEVITT** Yes, but it's narrower and deeper and the expectations around any one franchise we'd launch are huge. We look at all our launches with the lens that we need the TV show to be successful but we need the whole franchise to be successful in multiple ways like talent touring, global sales, or a partnership with Amazon Prime or Hulu.

It would appear these launches—with all their social media engagement—are enormously central to what Levitt is accountable for at the end of year when he gets his performance review.

**LEVITT** Yes, one of our group's core deliverables is doing the launches, which means the strategy, the ad creative, the media we buy and spend, the event marketing, social media. Everything. I'm on the hook for everything we launch. That's the traditional role of marketing. The other thing that's a key owned deliverable is what we call fan engagement. Maybe it's our fancy way of saying social media, but we think of it as beyond. Social media is the means but fan engagement is the end goal and it's really about developing those relationships with fans that go beyond them being passive views of TV programming.

How do you approach the challenge of keeping pace with the change in social and raising the level of engagement?

**LEVITT** What's exciting about this area is it's changing every couple of months. What's scary about it is it's changing every couple of months. So just when you think you've nailed what it means to be engaging with fans in the space and doing cool, innovative stuff, the rules change. We're constantly reinventing. We were early on the Vine train. Six months later, acceptance didn't catch on and Vines weren't part of our DNA. Instagram video is now. Last year we did a comedy festival on Twitter because no one had done that yet. It got hundreds of millions of impressions. That is the kind of stuff our brand needs to be doing.

*Adapted from a longer interview. This article corrects an error in the print edition that mistakenly used "fat" instead of "fun" engagement in several instances.*

