

New players get ready to roll

UPN, WB Network prepare to take their shots



By David Tobenkin

Call them fraternal twins.

The new WB Television and United Paramount networks will enter the broadcasting world in mid-January, but with programing lineups, target audiences and distribution strategies that differ markedly.

Backing each is an initial investment estimated at \$300 million for the four years many predict will be necessary to break even. Losses in the first year will be \$50 million-\$75 million per network, estimates Merrill Lynch media analyst Jessica Reif.

Both are risking that money on the premise that enough quality programing can be produced to justify their existence, that a new network can be branded in an already crowded marketplace, that the expansion requisite for profitability will not be blocked by inadequate distribution, and that their new pipeline will not be made obsolete by rapidly advancing distribution technology.

Day one

On Wednesday, Jan. 11, at 8 p.m., viewers watching WB-affiliated stations will see Daffy Duck and Bugs Bunny argue over who gets to turn on

the network. In the background, animator Chuck Jones will be drawing another classic Warner Bros. character, Michigan J. Frog. While no one is looking, feisty Michigan will flip the switch to launch the network.

WB, owned by Warner Bros. and supported by Tribune stations, will launch the network that night with two hours of programing, including sitcoms *The Wayans Bros.* and *Unhappily Ever After* and a special hour version of serialized comedy *Muscle* at 9.

The WB Network is guided by the architect of the last successful network launch, Fox veteran Jamie Kellner, who is placing his faith in an initial single Wednesday night of four sitcoms that will target 12-34-year-olds, a kids block stuffed with Warner Bros. product in the wings and a distribution system that emphasizes in-pattern clearances.

The following Monday, Jan. 16, viewers of UPN-affiliated stations at 8 p.m. will get their own network sign-on message. UPN, owned by Viacom-Paramount and Chris

Craft/United, will follow with a special two-hour episode of the latest incarnation of Paramount's multibillion-dollar *Star Trek* franchise, *Star Trek: Voyager*. It will follow the next night with its regularly scheduled pair of dramatic hours, *Marker* and *The Watcher*, and, on Saturday, Jan. 21, at 12-2 p.m., with *Call to Glory*, the first installment of a regular Saturday afternoon movie block.

UPN is the brainchild of Paramount Television Group Chairman Kerry McCluggage and United Television President and Chairman Evan Thompson. It is now run by Lucie Salhany, the former Paramount executive who stewarded many of Paramount Television's greatest syndicated successes and later headed the Fox network. Her 18-49 male-targeted network will launch Mondays and Tuesdays with two nights of prime time programing divided between sitcoms and dramas, and a distribution strategy emphasizing exclusive use of broadcast clearances.

The networks predict they will launch in roughly 80% of the country, but nearly a third of UPN's clearances and 13% of its coverage will be out-of-pattern secondary clearances,

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