

Big 3 nets improvise in early days of the war

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Some shuffled news with entertainment.

War in Iraq

With the slow escalation of combat in the opening days of the war with Iraq last week, some broadcast networks aired their regularly scheduled programming in prime time, mitigating at least early-on the impact of advertising losses resulting from the switch to continuous, commercial-free, all-news coverage.

And while many advertisers expressed a desire not to have their commercials run in grisly war coverage, most allowed their scheduled ads to air on the Big Three networks, which expansively covered the early days of the war-but did not go wall-to-wall.

A switch to continuous ad-free war coverage will mean ad revenue losses for each of the Big Three-ABC, NBC, and CBS-of about \$20 million a day. As it played out, however, during the first 44 hours from the start of combat on March 19, instead of losing a potential \$32 million, CBS and NBC only took about \$14 million in ad loss hits, media buyers estimated. ABC, which was the only Big Three network to preempt its entire entertainment programming March 20 for commercial-free war news, took about a \$24 million ad hit over the 44-hour period.

Those ad losses were expected to escalate over the weekend, however, as the U.S. military on March 21 began its "shock and awe" bombing campaign of Iraq, and Iraqi forces put up "sporadic resistance" to U.S. troops advancing toward Baghdad.

When NBC News first broke to coverage on March 19 at 9:33 p.m., the networks and news channels all stayed with commercial-free news the rest of the night, including President Bush's address to the nation. From the morning of March 20 through press time, though, networks have chosen to switch out of news coverage-CBS carried its NCAA basketball tournament Thursday while NBC ran the first two hours of its Must See TV lineup-when they could, and carried commercials. ABC and Fox both pre-empted all prime time entertainment programming in favor of commercial-free news coverage, but as one media buyer pointed out, "under the circumstances, [those shows] would not have gotten any audience anyway. They're two shows that advertisers probably would have wanted to pull out of."

Tempers did flare between some of the broadcast networks' sales executives and a handful of advertisers, which, fearing a potential viewer backlash, demanded that their ads be pulled in all programming for a week after the war began. At least two of the Big Four networks initially balked at the demand, reasoning that no ads would run in war coverage anyway but that once regular entertainment programming returned, the advertisers were under contract to run.

"We are not opposed to discussing the switching of an ad that might not be in the best taste, and realize there are certain categories that may not be appropriate to run ads during a conflict," said one network ad executive. "But to unabashedly say they want to pull all of their ads for seven or 10 days and not pay for them is obnoxious. They have a contract to run these ads and can't unilaterally decide they won't pay for them."

Mike Drexler, CEO of Optimedia, said both sides have to realize the extenuating circumstances and "drop their clubs:" adding, "It's all about discussion, relationships and negotiation and it needs to be done on an advertiser-by-advertiser basis because all products and categories are different."



CNN was commercial-free as war began.

As the weekend approached, the situation appeared to be working itself out. When NBC aired its regular Thursday night comedy block, for example, General Motors, Wal-Mart, JCPenney, Wendy's, Lowe's, H&R Block, Toyota, Ford, Motrin and several movie companies all ran their scheduled ad spots. Chrysler, VB, Kit Kat, Bayer Aspirin, General Motors and assorted pharmaceutical companies ran ad spots on the network's nightly news programs.

"We don't want to pull our advertising;" said an exec at a major retailer. "A lot of advertisers learned after 9-11 that once you go off the air, it can take a while to re-express and find holes to get your ads back on the air. We just don't want our ads in TV newsmagazines that feature war coverage."

The situation seemed to be much more civil on the cable side, where CNN, Fox News Channel and MSNBC had planned to run commercial free for at least 48 hours once the war began, and had discussed with advertisers in advance how to re-allocate those dollars when commercial breaks returned. "We have been there so many times before:" said Greg D'Alba, executive vp of CNN sales. -with staff reports

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