

A Series and Its Sponsor Capture a Shared Link With History

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Enterprise Rent-A-Car's founder, Jack Taylor, standing, right, on the Enterprise in World War II. The image is from the series.

ALTHOUGH television is a visual medium, sound is also important. And there are few sweeter sounds for viewers than the words "brought to you with limited commercial interruption by. ..."

A large advertiser will bring that phrase to life on Friday — and for the next 10 weeks — on a leading cable network, agreeing to become the exclusive sponsor of a mini-series and run far fewer spots than usual.

As a result, all 10 hourlong episodes will offer viewers more program content than if they were interrupted by conventional commercials. Each will run 54 to 55 minutes, rather than the typical 44 to 45 minutes.

The mini-series, "Battle 360," about the aircraft carrier U.S.S. Enterprise, will appear on the History Channel each Friday through May 2. The sole sponsor is the Enterprise Rent-A-Car Company, which, it turns out, was named by its founder, a decorated World War II veteran, after the ship.

(Fear not, fans of a firm line between programming and advertising. Executives at Enterprise and the network promise there will be no product placements or branded integrations.)

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The sponsorship agreement, with a value estimated at \$1 million, was made as part of the yearly purchase of commercial time by Enterprise from the History Channel. It is indicative of the growing counterattack by TV networks — and advertisers — against viewers who are increasingly willing to use digital video recorders and other technologies to avoid and ignore commercials.

In the first two decades of television, advertisers and ad agencies produced the shows that appeared on the broadcast networks. Commercials were limited because a company was typically the sole sponsor of a show for a full season, a status reflected in the titles of series like "Armstrong Circle Theater," "Colgate Comedy Hour," "Kraft Music Hall" and "Schlitz Playhouse of Stars."

Seasonal sponsorship faded after the 1960s, with exceptions like "Hallmark Hall of Fame" and "Mutual of Omaha's Wild Kingdom." The problems included rising production costs, which made

it difficult for one advertiser to pay for an entire season, as well as concerns that sponsors wielded too much control over content.

One notorious example of such interference, cited frequently in books and articles about the period, involved an episode of the drama series "Playhouse 90" from 1959, about the Nazi war crimes trials. References to the gas chambers in concentration camps became "chambers" because the show was sponsored by the American Gas Association.

Program sponsorship was replaced with commercials from multiple advertisers during each episode. When 60-second commercials gave way to 30-second spots in the 1970s — and subsequently to :15s, :10s and even :5s — shows started to seem cluttered.

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As a result, " 'limited commercial interruption' is obviously a selling point," said Nancy Dubuc, executive vice president and general manager at the History Channel in New York, part of the A&E Television Networks.

"As the general manager of the network, I would love to go commercial-free," Ms. Dubuc said, but "programming needs" require revenue from advertising as well as affiliates.

A sponsorship "with a financial commitment" like this one from Enterprise, she added, "allows us to give the audience more of the show."

Other examples of clutter-busting include the sponsorships of news programs by Philips Electronics North America, part of Royal Philips Electronics. That enabled CBS to lengthen the segments in an episode of "60 Minutes" and for Brian Williams to deliver more news during a broadcast of the "NBC Nightly News."

The trend is not limited to TV. Radio stations belonging to companies like Clear Channel have sought to reduce the commercial clutter. The name of the Clear Channel initiative — "Less is more" — epitomizes the philosophy.

"It's not a business decision; it's a culture decision," said Andrew C. Taylor, chairman and chief executive at Enterprise in St. Louis, whose father, Jack, founded the company.

"A lot of how we drive our success is from what Jack learned in the Navy: mission, teamwork, honor, integrity, fun," Mr. Taylor said.

The sponsorship "is one of those things that's between philanthropy and paid advertising," Mr. Taylor said. "I think it will have some legs."

To help the mini-series stand up and stand out, the History Channel is devoting a Web site to "Battle 360" (history.com/minisites/battle_360). The contents include episode guides, video clips, discussion forums and facts about the carrier, which took part in most of the sea battles in the Pacific during World War II.

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Jack Taylor — who is 85 years old, according to his son — will appear in a promotional spot to be shown during episodes of "Battle 360" in lieu of commercials for Enterprise. The company was started in 1957 and rents cars under brand names like Alamo and National as well as Enterprise.

The spot will describe the mini-series as being "brought to you by the men and women of Enterprise, honoring company founder Jack Taylor, a proud veteran of the aircraft carrier Enterprise."

He is seen on camera, talking about how he likes to "name things because of sentimental attachment" and considers Enterprise to be "an uplifting name."

The mini-series was already in development, said Mel Berning, executive vice president for advertising sales at A&E Television Networks in New York, before the discussions with Enterprise began.

"I knew that Jack Taylor had been a fighter pilot in World War II," Mr. Berning said, and "we discovered the connection that he had served aboard the Enterprise" as well as another carrier, the Essex.

The network has signed sponsorship deals for other shows, he added, with advertisers like the Army, but they were not as extensive as the agreement with Enterprise.

Two Enterprise agencies in New York worked with the History Channel on the sponsorship, Mr. Berning said: Avrett Free Ginsberg, part of the Interpublic Group of Companies, and PHD, part of the Omnicom Group.

A&E Television Networks is owned by the ABC unit of Walt Disney, the Hearst Corporation and NBC Universal, part of General Electric.

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