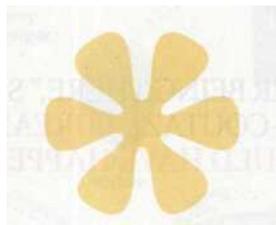




# Reality TV's Jackpot Queen

CECILE FROT-COUTAZ IS A FORCE BEHIND AMERICAN IDOL AND AMERICA'S GOT TALENT. CAN HER BRAND OF SCHLOCK SAVE NETWORK TV?

BY DEVIN LEONARD



HAVE THE RUMORS of network television's demise been greatly exaggerated? It was hard not to wonder whether years of obituaries had been premature as NBC racked up prodigious ratings last month for its coverage of the Beijing Olympics. According to Nielsen, 28 million Americans tuned in nightly to watch Michael Phelps crawl, breaststroke, butterfly, and backstroke his way to eight gold medals. They kept watching even as stars from other nations, such as Jamaica's felicitously named Usain Bolt, sprinted to glory.

The other recent network surprise? The success of NBC's *Americas Got Talent*. This competition-cum-freak-show is hosted by Jerry Springer, daytime's foremost sleazemeister, and pits sword-swallowing carnival performers against cross-dressing Britney Spears impersonators.

Its 12.6 million viewers made it the summer's top-ranked regularly scheduled show.

America's *Got Talent*, the Olympics, and the ratings king of the new millennium—*American Idol*—are all bona fide recent hits. But if you strip out the Olympics, which after all come along only every two years, what do the other two have in common? Well, Cecile Frot-Coutaz, for starters. She's the CEO of FremantleMedia North America, which co-produces both shows. Frot-Coutaz (pronounced FROT-coo-TAHZ) was instrumental in bringing *American Idol* to our shores and selling it to Fox. The 42-year-old Los Angeles-based French expatriate has an instinct for high-performance reality television. And whether you're addicted to *American Idol* and *America's Got Talent*

or think they represent the final, irrevocable collapse of Western civilization, she's one of the people whose success will determine whether network TV really can resuscitate itself, or if this summer was its swan song and the networks are destined to continue on their path of fragmentation and decline.

Think of Frot-Coutaz, an MBA and former corporate strategist at Pearson, as the suit (Chanel, please) who controls the purse strings on *Idol* and *Got Talent*, as her company refers to them.



**CLUTCHING GLORY** Frot-Coutaz and producers Charles Boyd (left) and Ken Warwick with their 2007 Emmy for "Idol Gives Back"

**"WITHOUT HER BEING THERE," SIMON COWELL SAYS OF FROT-COUTAZ, "I DREAD TO THINK OF WHAT WOULD HAVE HAPPENED."**



Simon Fuller, the British impresario behind the Spice Girls, may have created *American Idol* (and his 19 Entertainment company still co-produces it). Ken Warwick—and until recently, *So You Think You Can Dance* judge Nigel Lythgoe—runs the show on a daily basis. But it is Frot-Coutaz who played a key role in selling the show to Fox, and it is she who implemented the groundbreaking and lucrative product-placement deals with Coke and Ford.

Not least among her skills: She has mediated feuds involving Hoi's volatile personalities, among them Simon Cowell, the show's famously acerbic judge. Cowell practically purrs when he is asked about Frot-Coutaz. "She has kept everyone together," he says. "Without her being there, I dread to think of what would

have happened." Now Cowell and Frot-Coutaz are producing *America's Got Talent* together.

The last few years have been good for the North American division of FremantleMedia, a British reality-television producer responsible for the *Idol* and *Got Talent* franchises in the U.S. and around the globe. Fremantle doesn't break out its financial results. Still, you can get a sense of how Frot-Coutaz is doing by examining the public filings of the Bertelsmann subsidiary that is Fremantle's parent. The subsidiary's U.S. revenues—the bulk of which are generated by her group—were \$310 million in 2007, up from \$280 million the year before and \$177 million in 2005.

Even so, this is no time to relax. *American Idol* ended on a high note with 32 million

people tuning into the May 21 finale, an increase of 3% from the previous year's denouement. But the first hairline cracks have appeared in the juggernaut. Regular viewership has slipped nearly 11% in the past two seasons, according to Nielsen. And though *America's Got Talent* caught on after it amped up the bizarreness of some of its acts while playing up the contestants' human interest stories, its staying power is still unclear. (*Got Talent* makes *Idol* look like *Masterpiece Theater*, though it also borrows a few elements from the singing contest, including having an eclectic panel of judges: former *Baywatch* hunk and camp hero David Hasselhoff, ex-reality star Sharon Osbourne, and Piers Morgan, a former British tabloid editor apparently imported to inject a dose of Cowellian bile.)

Now Frot-Coutaz is pinning her hopes on *Hole In The Wall*, her company's version of a Japanese "Human Tetris" in which contestants must squeeze themselves through various openings in a moving wall or get knocked into a swimming pool. It debuts on Fox on Sept. 11. Is *Hole In The Wall* the next *Idol*? It seems like a long shot—to use a more polite phrase than, say, a caustic TV judge might choose—but then again it wouldn't be the first unexpected reality hit.

"Look, hopefully, we will have many more successful shows," says Frot-Coutaz. "Whether they will hit people the way *Idol* does, I don't know. If your objective was to come up with something as big as that, you'd be setting yourself up for failure. You'd wake up every morning and be really depressed."





**CUT OUT FOR DIPLOMACY**  
Frot-Coutaz excels at handling high-profile personalities on her company's various shows.

well take risks. At least then you'll know why you're fired."

Frot-Coutaz took risks and rose quickly. She oversaw Pearson's acquisition of the original incarnation of Fremantle, which brought the company top game shows like *The Price Is Right* and *Password*. The rights to *Baywatch* also came with the purchase.

By 2000, Pearson Television was a unit of Bertelsmann and was renamed FremantleMedia. Its focus began to shift from syndicating old shows to producing new ones like *Pop Idol*, the progenitor of the *Idol* franchise that would eventually migrate to 40 different television markets around the world. In 2002, Fremantle assigned Frot-Coutaz, whom the company had dispatched to the U.S. two years before, to sell an American version of the show.

The French executive helped pitch *Idol* to reluctant Fox executives after the other three networks turned up their noses. She became the show's master corporate dealmaker and handholder. She's the person who kept Paula Abdul from jumping ship because she was unnerved by Cowell's rhetorical assaults on contestants whose singing fell short of his expectations. "Cecile would fly in, take Paula aside, and say, 'Oh, those terrible English!'" laughs Lythgoe.

Frot-Coutaz also stepped up in 2004, when Cowell signed a deal with Fremantle to create an *Idol*-like contest called *The X Factor*, and Fuller's company sued both Cowell's production outfit and Fremantle, arguing that the shows were too similar. Frot-Coutaz negotiated a truce, and the show now airs in Britain and other countries. "I think certainly, at the time, she was the one person that both myself and Simon could talk to and get an honest answer," says Cowell. "She handled that role very well."

Once *American Idol* became a hit, Frot-Coutaz faced new pressures. She says Fox pushed to run *Idol* twice a year (a Fox spokesper-

son denies this), as CBS does with *Survivor*. But she feared this would shorten *Idol*'s lifespan. Ultimately, Frot-Coutaz got her way. Today she looks prescient. *Idol* drew an average of 27 million viewers per show this year. A few years ago *Survivor* boasted such ratings. But last spring *Survivor: Micronesia* got 12.7 million viewers.

*Idol*'s success opened many doors in Hollywood for Fremantle. But Frot-Coutaz's quest for the next big hit was anything but smooth. *The Swan*, a show about ordinary women who undergo plastic surgery, bombed in 2004. "It's kind of a hairy show," says Mike Darnell, Fox's president of alternative entertainment. "I don't know any other way to say it. You are doing full-on surgery."

Nothing really seemed to pull in a huge audience until *Americas Got Talent*. Now Frot-Coutaz is pinning her hopes on *Hole in the Wall*. "You have sort of several layers of comedy in the show, right?" she says excitedly. "There are the contestants in little shiny suits. They're visually interesting. Then you've got that moment when the wall comes out, and the reaction of the people when they see it. And



**FROT-COUTAZ'S FATHER WOULDN'T LET HER WATCH MOST TV AS A CHILD. AS A RESULT, TV HELD THE ALLURE OF THE FORBIDDEN.**

then you've got the moment when they get dunked in the water!"

Um, maybe you have to see it to really appreciate it. Still, Frot-Coutaz's gut may be working for her again. If ever there was a time for an American version of one of those weird Japanese game shows in which contestants face ridiculous challenges and are humiliated if they fail, this is it. Versions of the show have already succeeded for Fremantle in China, Russia, and Argentina. This summer's biggest new program, ABC's *Wipeout* (a game show in which contestants try to survive a wacky obstacle course—or get knocked into a pool of water) drew its inspiration from this foreign genre. Another ABC show, *I Survived a Japanese Gameshow*, in which Americans were humiliated on actual Japanese game shows, didn't fare as well. But what do you expect? It was up against *Americas Got Talent*.