Cable’s Holiday Marathon Programming Is Hotter Than Ever Due to the Pandemic

As the industry was still unsure when sports would return and TV production would resume, Ed Georger, evp, advertising sales and digital media for Crown Media Family Networks, Hallmark Channel’s parent company, had a calming message for clients. “The one thing you can count on: They will not cancel Christmas.”

And while almost nothing about the Christmas season seems normal this year, several cable networks are airing their traditional multi-month marathons of holiday movies and shows.

Hallmark Channel’s Countdown to Christmas and sister network Hallmark Movies and Mysteries’ Miracles of Christmas began on Oct. 23, the same day Lifetime kicked off It’s a Wonderful Lifetime. Freeform debuted its Kickoff to Christmas on Nov. 1, which leads into 25 Days of Christmas beginning on Dec. 1. AMC is rolling out its Best Christmas Ever on Nov. 16.

The round-the-clock movie marathons are always a draw for marketers because of their reliable, popular content that’s perfect for family viewing. But now they also provide much-needed comfort in a pandemic.

“It’s a great environment to be in, and it gives us that reach we need. Especially right now, as we’re unfortunately seeing ratings being down across most programming, there is that reliability and dependability in these holiday programs we’re investing in,” said Maureen Bosetti, chief investment officer at media agency Initiative.

The networks put some pandemic-inspired twists on holiday offerings this year.

For Freeform’s annual branded content campaign with Kohl’s, the network usually pairs talent with a social influencer for the campaign. But “clearly that’s not the reality” during Covid, said Danielle Calnon, vp, entertainment brand solutions at Disney Advertising Sales. For this year’s campaign, Sherry Cold from Freeform’s Good Trouble appeared alongside her real-life mom, Zeng Ping Pan.

“We’re not getting in a room with someone we don’t know; we’re with people we know and love, and who are in our tight circle,” Calnon continued.

Since AMC debuted Best Christmas Ever in 2018, its December prime-time ratings have jumped 39% in total viewers and 79% in adults 25-54. December is now “our top-performing month. This is our Super Bowl, and we’re seeing more activity around it than ever before,” said Kim Kelleher, president of commercial revenue and partnerships at AMC Networks.

In a new offering this year, AMC lined up Pepsi as the exclusive sponsor for all non-linear airings of Elf, its most-watched holiday movie on digital platforms. AMC also extended Best Christmas Ever by two weeks due to the pandemic and beefed up holiday movies on VOD.

“Anything that can bring a smile to someone’s face like these movies can feels very important,” said Kelleher. “It breaks through everything that’s happening in the world and in our country right now in a positive, uplifting way where you can escape into a better time.”

Because of this year’s uncertainty, some networks are seeing stronger demand earlier in their multi-month holiday lineups than usual.

“Marketers want to get our messaging a little earlier, especially around holidays. My understanding is they’re trying to get people in and get it done before the rush,” said Peter Olsen, evp of ad sales at A+E Networks.

However, other marketers are taking their time. “I’m seeing a lot of last-minute decision-making for marketers, and I’m certain it’s because of Covid uncertainties,” said Calnon.

This has resulted in an active scatter market for multiple networks, which is proving an extra holiday season jolt to their bottom line. “We’re seeing a very robust scatter marketplace that’s making up for some of the delayed spending we saw in the upfront,” said Georger. For Lifetime, fourth-quarter scatter is up 30% compared to a year ago, said Olsen.

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