

Disney Ad Chief Talks Aliens, Jimmy Kimmel, and Ads on ESPN (the Streamer)

They mostly come out at 4 p.m. ... *mostly*.

The Javits Center briefly resembled the exomoon LV-426 on Tuesday afternoon when Disney's upfront presentation was hijacked by a marauding Xenomorph. The scream-inducing moment was all in service of FX on Hulu's upcoming *Alien: Earth*—the first scripted series based on the beloved sci-fi film franchise—and also featured 50 performers playing scientists pushing 11 crates holding eggs of nearly-hatched aliens.

Besides thrilling the crowd, the *Alien: Earth* interlude also demonstrated the full power of Disney's showmanship, not to mention the depth of its IP library. "*Everyone* recognizes *Alien*," Rita Ferro, Disney's president of global advertising, tells ADWEEK. "It's made for that kind of stage where the storytelling is in line with the quality and expectation of something coming from Disney."

That's a theme that Ferro reinforces throughout our latest upfront postmortem interview. While the Mouse House is home to many doors—all of which lead to many different platforms, brands, and content—they all lead to the unrivaled production value and reach made possible by the Disney name.

"Disney is a brand that is elastic," Ferro emphasizes. "It includes Marvel, Star Wars, ESPN, ABC News, and FX. But it's all coming from Disney, and our quality and storytelling owns the hearts and minds of fans and consumers across any platform you want to watch. That's simply not the same everywhere."

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

ADWEEK: Let's start at the end of the presentation: Jimmy Kimmel closed out the show with his annual roast, and he was particularly fiery this year. What was your reaction to his set?

Ferro: The beauty of Jimmy's annual roast is that it's always a surprise. Every year, I brace for impact, but I felt pretty good about the fact that I personally wasn't roasted much this year. My mom was in the room, so I was a little more sensitive! *[Laughs]* But Jimmy's always so funny and free in that roast. He goes after all of us, and he made no exception to Bob Iger, too. There have been some years where it was more painful than this year; it was funny and, at the end of the day, very Jimmy.

I spoke with NBCU ad chief Mark Marshall about his cameo in the roast, and he said it was all in good fun.

I haven't talked to Mark yet—I have to call him! But I always say that if you make it onto a comedian's hit list, you've made it. He's a good friend and one of the funniest people I know, so I think he appreciates the comedy.

Jimmy did call out the lack of new programming on ABC—there's only one new show on the fall schedule this year. Is that a sign of the times for broadcast television or more of a sign of the evolving nature of the upfront?

I think it's a sign of how we're thinking about programming, our cross-platform content strategy, and making sure that the shows that are going to the right platforms are the shows that make the most sense for those platforms. We've made a concerted effort over the last couple of months to focus on what is resonating with the audiences on ABC, and we've seen

that live content or what appears to be live content continues to resonate tremendously—things like *Dancing With the Stars*, *American Idol*, and the *Bachelor* series.

The other thing, too, is that length-of-show was my number one priority this year. Because of the breadth and size of our portfolio, we've had two-and-a-half-hour shows in the past, and I wanted to pick a smattering of some of the best content to leave people wanting more. We landed at 80 minutes, and there was so much greatness—and even more greatness that didn't make the stage.

Jimmy Kimmel roasts Disney at the upfront. *Courtesy ABC/Jimmy Kimmel/Disney*

Jimmy also had a good line about ESPN+ seeming more like a minus now that the new DTC streamer has been announced. What

are the plans for that platform going forward?

We have a lot of rights deals across the marketplace that were done as part of ESPN+; the UFC is one of them, and also some of the college sports. That product will continue to exist because there is a marketplace for it—ESPN+ has over 30,000 hours of live events. But we are also prioritizing the triple bundle that includes ESPN, Hulu, and Disney+ with or without ads for consumers. We're going to be very ambitious in terms of how we want to go to market with that product, with a promotional price at launch that will then ultimately evolve to the final price.

What are the reactions you've been hearing about the new ESPN product?

People are extraordinarily excited. There's tremendous momentum behind sports right now, not only among core fans but also casual fans. And a lot of the growth is coming from women's sports. We have committed to women's sports across our platforms for a very long time, and we're seeing that as a tremendous driver of engagement. We have so many partners asking us about what we can do together in the women's sports space, and the ESPN app will be an extraordinary place to be able to do different things.

Can you clarify whether the ad-free tier of the triple bundle will feature ads during live sports?

Sports always has ads, because sports has natural breaks. So there will be an ad-tier and a non-ad-tier, but ESPN will always have advertising. You have natural breaks that happen that need to be filled.

ABC will be airing Super Bowl LXI in 2027. What demand are you seeing so far from advertisers?

We have 67 multi-year deals anchored in sports, and the NFL is

a big driver of that. Anyone who is in the football space is asking to be part of these multi-year renewals and also asks, "Can I include the Super Bowl as part of that?" So that's obviously going to be an important piece, and those conversations are ongoing. Super Bowl LXI will also be in our hometown of Los Angeles, where we have our headquarters, as well as a theme park and stations. So we're thinking about how we're going to bring that full experience to life outside of the game and create experiences that brands can be a part of.

In terms of other live events, the Oscars saw an uptick in viewers this year courtesy of its Hulu livestream. There were some technical glitches, but it didn't seem to impact advertisers. What will the second year of that arrangement look like?

The Oscars definitely saw audience growth, and I think that's because of the way that the show is presenting itself. We're working with the show's producers to make sure that we're telling the story of the Oscars, but also creating custom opportunities for both platforms, because it's a different audience between who watches the show on ABC and who watches on Hulu. It's going to be a continuing evolution, and you'll see more opportunities in streaming because we want it. Oscar fans want it, and the Academy wants it.

From l to r, Timothy Olyphant, Sydney Chandler, and Babou Ceesay star in *Alien: Earth**Courtesy Disney/Jennifer Potttheiser*

The Disney+ portion of the event emphasized Marvel and Star Wars shows, some of which are aimed at older audiences. Are you seeing a wider range of brands interested in that platform because of the age mix?

When you say “Disney,” people tend to think “family.” But when you look at the core consumer on our streaming platforms, more than three-fourths of them are adults. The growth in engagement is coming from that demographic, so we can do custom opportunities with brands who want to show up. Those properties have built-in fan bases, which means they have opportunities for built-in organic promotion.

Disney recently rolled out two new adtech tools, Disney Experience Composer and Disney Compass. What feedback are you getting about those offerings?

We've been slowly rolling them out, working with agencies to integrate them. Compass is a game-changer for how we work across the marketplace. When you can have all of your data in one place to be able to plan, buy, and measure every campaign across the marketplace, and you can use one interface to compare and leverage insights across the full funnel, it is incredibly powerful. Every agency and every client coming on board with us is thrilled and would like to continue to do more with it.

With Composer, we've seen that one of our biggest growth strategies was around mid-market advertisers who don't always have multiple broad-reaching campaigns. We knew that in order to continue to drive growth in that marketplace, we needed to allow our technology to create dynamically different brand creative assets at scale and leverage the right moment in time [to match] the right piece of content and the right ad. That's what that tool will do.

Will Disney be back at the upfronts next year? And do you have your date already booked?

We will be back. I think next year's upfronts are the week of May 11, and we're always on Tuesday at 4 p.m. We've already started planning; I was talking to our team internally about how we continue to iterate on the things that move the needle for us. We always show up as one Disney, even as the consumer journey comes to life across different brands. We very much leaned into that with an upfront that was creative in its storytelling.

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