Freeform Is Using Events to Drive Viewership While Streaming ‘Everything’

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Freeform president Tom Ascheim knows young people are watching television differently, but they’re still tuning into linear—as long as his network programs events to drive viewership, that is.

At the Television Critics Association’s winter press tour in Pasadena, Calif., Ascheim said that 31 Nights of Halloween and 25 Days of Christmas, two seasonal programming blocks that have aired on Freeform since the 1990s, together drove a combined 100 million viewers to the channel in the last quarter. “Who said young people don’t watch TV?” he said.

That success means Freeform is trying out another holiday event, this time around Valentine’s Day. The channel will debut its first-ever Valentine’s Day original movie, The Thing About Harry, on Feb. 15 (yes, the day after Valentine’s Day), as the anchor to a new seasonal programming block, which will be called, Love However the FF You Want.

“Everybody likes an event, so we like to lean into as many of them as we can throughout the year,” Ascheim said following the panel.

Despite the new strategy, Freeform is looking beyond linear. As traditional television ratings continue their years-long slide, Freeform has taken the approach to “stream everything,” Ascheim said, and about two-thirds of Freeform original’s

viewership now occurs on Hulu.

Hulu svp and head of originals Craig Erwich said Friday morning that there were no plans from Hulu to build out a branded hub for Freeform-only programming on the Hulu platform, similar to the upcoming FX on Hulu, and Ascheim agreed that he didn't think such a move was necessary.

"So much of discovery happens algorithmically, and all of our Freeform originals are already on Hulu," Ascheim said. "There's not really a need for us to have a destination."

Freeform, part of parent company Disney, remains focused squarely on attracting young viewers, and particularly young women, with programming that reflects the political sensibilities of that audience The channel has ordered the fourth season of Grown-ish, the spinoff of ABC's Black-ish, and has given a thumbs-up to a third season of Good Trouble. It's also picked up Last Summer, a puzzle-box mystery thriller written by Bert Royal and executive produced by Jessica Biel.

"In this era of Peak TV—frankly, peak everything—if you don't know who you're serving and what you stand for, you are doomed to just fade away," Ascheim said.

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