How Covid-19 Has Changed The CW—and When Its Schedule Could Return to Normal

Last May, while several broadcasters were still holding out hope that they would be able to have a normal fall season despite the pandemic-related production shutdowns, The CW was one of the first networks to throw in the towel. The network said it would delay its 2020-21 TV season until January 2021—when most of its scripted shows would begin to premiere—and air mostly acquired and unscripted shows in the fall.

“We made a hard choice not to try to rush stuff into production, for health and safety,” Mark Pedowitz, The CW’s chairman and CEO, said. “It was the right strategy.”

But the network’s ratings have taken a big hit without the meat of its lineup: season-to-date, The CW is averaging just a 0.1 rating in the adults 18-49 demo in Nielsen’s most current ratings. That’s a whopping 66% drop from the 0.3 rating it had a year ago, when the bulk of its lineup had already been airing for three months.

“You’re starting to feel pain after awhile, let’s be candid about it,” said Pedowitz. Plus, “when you run the [fourth quarter] analysis, you’re not thinking that you’d be competing against baseball, football, basketball, and hockey,” as all of the leagues compensated for Covid shutdowns earlier in the year.

But help is finally on the way: The CW is ready to bring back its biggest scripted series over the next month, beginning

with Batwoman, which returns Sunday for Season 2 with a new person inside the batsuit (Javicia Leslie, stepping in after original star Ruby Rose exited the show last May).

The network will debut 12 scripted original series in January and February (including two new shows: Walker, a Walker Texas Ranger reboot starring Jared Padalecki that premieres Jan. 21, and the latest DC Comics superhero series, Superman & Lois, coming Feb. 23), with another eight shows ready for midseason, which in this unusual year won't be until May or June.

And because of the early schedule announcement, "advertisers knew what to expect from us," unlike other broadcasters, who didn't lock in their fall plans until months later, said Pedowitz. "Because we gave them certainty in the marketplace and a plan, we're in good shape."

As The CW finally kicks off its real season, Pedowitz spoke with Adweek about how the network has been navigating Covid-19, losing the coveted "Netflix bump" after that streaming deal lapsed and when he expects to see something resembling a normal schedule.

Digital growth, despite losing the 'Netflix bump'

Despite the linear losses, The CW has seen "great growth" on its digital platforms during the pandemic, said Pedowitz.

Last summer was the first time that The CW wasn't able to benefit from the "Netflix bump" for its newest series, which no longer immediately move over to that streaming service under an earlier megadeal. Instead, those shows—which include Batwoman, Katy Keene and Nancy Drew—are migrating to HBO Max.

Because of the smaller subscriber base on both platforms, "it doesn't have yet the same zeitgeist feel as Netflix delivered" for CW shows like Riverdale, The Flash, All American and In the Dark, which have seen enormous audience lifts after their most recent seasons move to Netflix.

But the tradeoff has been The CW’s ability to stack episodes from the newer shows on the network’s free, ad-supported streaming platform, and make the entire season-in-progress available to stream instead of just the usual “rolling five” episodes. That led to a 40-50% increase in digital ad impressions and engagement, said Pedowitz.

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