IAB Sets Virtual NewFronts 2021 Date, Extends Invitation to Linear TV

The Interactive Advertising Bureau (IAB) has set its upcoming 2021 NewFronts to take place virtually during the week of May 3, 2021.

The trade organization extended invitations to linear television broadcasters in addition to the digital media publishers, streamers and platforms that have long made up the presenters during the annual week of programming.

The date and decision, which the IAB announced this morning, is the first indication that the upcoming year's NewFronts and Upfronts may look different than they once did as digital and traditional video continue to converge and the industry looks for new and better ways to transact across platforms.

"What we're hearing from the buy-side, from agencies and brands, has come through very loud and clear: the lines of separation between traditional television and streaming and digital are fast eroding," said David Cohen, CEO of the IAB. "All of the big traditional players have significant streaming components. If ever there was a time for a holistic video marketplace, that's now."

The IAB's invitation to traditional media companies is a flexible one, Cohen said. The IAB wanted to give itself and all possible presenters plenty of time to work through scheduling questions and see if there are opportunities to combine forces, such as creating a centralized schedule or having NewFronts spill into another week.

“We’re open to talking through all of that,” Cohen said. “It’s an invitation to figure out how we collectively make the market a little more holistic.”

The decision marks the continued evolution of the NewFronts, which were first held in 2008 as digital media’s answer to linear broadcasters’ long tradition of flashy upfront presentations. As traditional TV companies pushed into streaming and as publishers into TV, those delineations meant the NewFronts has also had to change.

This year’s presentations, which were delayed by two months and then held virtually, featured heavily on growth in streaming and included first-time presenters like TikTok. The upfronts, which span from March through mid-May, saw most March events canceled and instead staggered virtual presentations through early June.

The IAB’s early appeal to work with traditional TV partners is not its first attempt to work more closer with them. Cohen, who joined the organization in March as president and was named CEO in September, began reaching out to linear broadcasters in early 2020 about upfront plans and inquired about joining up forces. But the timing made the partnership impractical and infeasible due to the pandemic and an unstable marketplace, he said.

There was an acknowledgment that the market was looking for a more holistic and streamlined cross-video solution, however, he said. Conversations following the NewFronts with marketers and buyers further underscored that advertisers are interested in a more streamlined buying process.

With that said, the IAB will need cooperation from broadcast partners to make an evolving NewFronts week a reality. “This is a little bit of wet cement mixed with a stake in the ground,” Cohen said.

For the second year in a row, the NewFronts will be held

virtually, a decision that Cohen said was due to the realization that would-be attendees would not be in the “headspace or health space” to attend an in-person event that normally draws more than a thousand attendees. A virtual event also allows for higher attendance, with the 2020 NewFronts drawing 14,000 attendees. The organization is aiming to surpass that in the upcoming year and may still hold a complementary in-person event depending on the state of Covid-19 vaccinations and public health guidelines.

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