Univision’s Interactive Digital Upfront Is Ready—When the Time Is Right

Key insights:

- Network’s Brand Labs team is focused on short-term needs.
- Production halts have not hurt the network’s lineup so far.

In 2018, Univision became the first upfront presenter to step away from the traditional onstage production in favor of an interactive experiential upfront. As 2020’s upfront conversations and plans continue to shift due the ongoing COVID-19 crisis, the Spanish-language broadcaster is preparing an interactive digital upfront presentation for whenever the time is right.

“We want to bring that same kind of innovation as our past presentations, so we are going to do that with some virtual reality and other interactive elements,” said Steve Mandala, Univision’s ad sales chief. “We are making those plans today so we are ready to go whenever it’s time to have those conversations.”

When that time will be, however, remains to be seen. The traditional upfront week has all but collapsed, and ad sales chiefs tell Adweek they’ll wait to hold conversations and presentations for when agencies and brands feel ready to transact. Mandala said there’s no clear picture of when that will be, but that it will depend on the advertiser.

“We know it’s not going to be mid-May,” Mandala said. “There are many big advertisers who want to participate in a future market and are ready or are going to be ready in the next few weeks. For others, they need a little bit more time to get themselves organized. What’s keeping us busy today is talking to advertisers about what their needs are now and what their needs are going to be.”

To address those more immediate advertiser needs, Univision is focusing on working with clients to address shifts in messaging, creative and changing consumer habits. Univision’s Brand Labs team, which Mandala is referring to as the broadcaster’s “SWAT team,” is planning conversations with clients about how Univision can offer consumer insights and move quickly to adapt, adjust and translate creative.

“Most of the inquiries we’ve received center on people that are looking to us to source insights about the Hispanic consumer,” Mandala said. “My overall sense is there are a lot of brands that are trying to find their voice, and we think we can be a resource for that.”

Univision recently worked with brands including Café Bustelo and Royal Prestige to create branded on-air segments addressing the current stay-at-home reality for many Americans, and the network’s sales team is leveraging that work as proof of Univision’s ability to adjust messaging on the fly. The broadcaster is also emphasizing its ability to turn around timely public service announcements for brand partners, including a PSA for the U.S. Census from Univision’s Uforia music brand.

Univision will head into upfront conversations with a newly expanded news lineup, which has added six hours of programming per week day in the past five weeks and is enjoying ratings spikes due to increased interest in news and information about COVID-19. News viewing on Univision is up 38% year-over-year among adults 25-54, with highest growth in the noon hour,

where Noticiero Univision: Edición Digital is up 109%. Univision says 86% of its news audience isn’t reached on English-language television.

The broadcaster also has a primetime lineup of dramatic programming that is also seeing high double-digit audience growth over the last four weeks. The broadcaster, which produces or co-produces more than 80% of its programming, has telenovelas Te Doy La Vida and Amor Eterno in hand through January 2021 without repeats, even as most production has halted due to COVID-19.

“It’s not like we’re waiting for pilots,” Mandala said. “We know what our schedule is, and we control a lot of that production. I think that will be a more profound differentiator this time around.”

With that said, Mandala is heading into upfront conversations expecting them to center on collaboration and flexibility above all else.

“This is not a time for a lot of hard sells,” Mandala said. “I think there will be a time when we’ll talk more about that, and when they are, we’re ready to have those conversations.”

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