

THE Hollywood REPORTER

MTV Chief on 'Real World's' Future, a 'Saturday Night Live' Past and Reality TV's 'Reality' Problem

This story first appeared in the April 18 issue of The Hollywood Reporter magazine.

Susanne Daniels' résumé reads like a teen girl's Netflix queue. There was her 1990s run at The WB, where she oversaw *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Dawson's Creek* and *Felicity*. Then the stint at Lifetime, where she acquired *Project Runway*. And now at MTV, she's serving up *Awkward*, *Teen Wolf* and the reality show *Catfish*. Since she joined the latter as president of programming in November 2012, the young-skewing network has doubled its scripted originals (two new comedies, two new dramas) and has attempted to breathe new life into longer-running series (see: *Real World Ex-Plosion*, the show's first significant format tweak since its 1992 debut). Although MTV hardly is a default destination for teenagers that it had been during its early music video incarnation, the net's 10 p.m. originals hour is up 7 percent among its core 12-to-34 demographic for the first quarter compared with the same period a year earlier. (Year-over-year time ratings were down 8 percent in the 12-month period ending in March.)

Looking ahead, Daniels, 48, a mother of four (three teens and a 4-year-old) with *The Office* writer-producer husband Greg, will look to lure back young men, add a couple of high-profile genre adaptations (*Shannara*, *Scream*) and continue to push the envelope (faux-lesbian comedy *Faking It*). The Harvard grad, who got her start as Lorne Michaels' assistant at *Saturday Night Live*, sat down in her Santa Monica office to discuss where the teen taste line sits today, the lack of "reality" in reality TV and the reason she would have passed on *Teen Mom*.

How different is the 22-year-old you're targeting at MTV from the one you programmed to at The WB?

They're definitely different in that they have access to multi-platform media and so many more choices; but in other ways, they really aren't because they're still going through all those anxieties that come with getting through your teenage years and all of the firsts: first love, first job, first kiss, first time you're independent from your parents.

For an earlier generation, MTV was default viewing. Is it possible to be that again?

It exists in moments for our audience. The Video Music Awards and Movie Awards are still that for our viewers, and so are the specials like the Miley Cyrus documentary. They speak to MTV's history, too. But how do you continue that legacy? It's about hit shows, as it is for any network. In our case, it's a challenge not to grow up the network. Most networks have an older median age than we do, and to stay there is a challenge because your audience grows up with you. Some of our audience started watching *Real World* 29 seasons ago.

How do you keep in touch with that age group?

It does help to have three kids at home in the demo. They're a constant focus group and a reminder of what's going on in teens' minds right now. And then I look to what movies are popular, what books are popular, what trends are popular, what music they're listening to and what's resonating not just domestically but internationally.

So, you watch teen films and listen to Miley Cyrus?

I do my fair share, and I enjoy it. I don't know if that means I'm immature or just that there's still a teen girl alive inside me. (Laughs.)

Who is the MTV viewer today?

I'd like to expand the notion of who the MTV viewer is because there are many versions of that girl and the brand should be broad enough to appeal to all of them. There's one girl who loves *Teen Mom*, but then there's a different teen girl who watches *Ridiculousness*. And I don't know if either one of those girls are going to be the girl who will watch *Finding Carter* this summer.

MTV has become very female. How important is it to lure guys back to the network?

It's absolutely important. MTV2 is doing a great job building a male-appeal youth audience with shows like *Charlamagne & Friends* and *Ain't That America*. We're watching those ratings grow, and you're going to see some crossover with those

shows and those stars to MTV. But I don't want it to be like, 'Guys, go watch MTV2.' A show like Ridiculousness on MTV appeals to both guys and girls, same with Fantasy Factory. And, ideally, I'd like to have a night of primetime for guys

Your sister network, VH1, has had a lot of success appealing to the African-American demo. Of interest?

My inclination is to cast as diverse and multiethnic as possible. The lead of [soapy teen comedy] Happyland is Latino and her mom is as well. I could see shows with African-American leads, Latino leads, Asian leads; ensembles that reflect the rainbow. But am I just going to target all one ethnicity? Probably not. Not unless a really exciting family were to walk in the door for a docuseries like Run's House. I'd love to have the equivalent of Run's House on today.

What's the biggest challenge in reality TV?

Where do you blur the line between reality and scripted? It's the whole Duck Dynasty question. We talk about that all the time: How much do we rely on producers to tell "reality stars" what to say, how to act and to plan out their supposedly natural day that we're watching. It just feels like the audience has demands and expectations for a level of storytelling that real reality programming would never get you.

How did the Buckwild tragedy [star Shain Gandee was found dead after going "mudding"] change your approach to the genre?

Whenever you experience a tragedy, you rethink the steps and think to yourself what could you have done differently to help prevent that. But it doesn't make me not want to pursue reality television; it makes me want to be as prudent as we can with educating our cast.

How has the line changed in terms of what's acceptable on MTV?

It's a very subjective call, and time periods and context matter. I think you can show bad behavior as long as you hang a lantern on the fact that it's bad behavior. Teen Mom is a great example. I was at The WB when MTV bought Teen Mom, and I remember thinking, "How exploitative can you get, MTV?" Just like Fear Factor, I might not have bought that show when I heard it because of the concern that it would be exploitative. But to MTV's credit, they worked carefully with the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy, and that show has been the cautionary tale in the biggest way for our audience. According to many studies, it's helped reduce the rate of teen pregnancy in the U.S.

You were able to re-energize Real World. How much life is left in that franchise, and can you return to the traditional format?

Truthfully, when I first got here I thought, "OK, we're doing season 28. Season 30 sounds like a good place to wrap this baby up." But now that we successfully launched Real World Ex-Plosion, I don't feel that way anymore. I feel like one day you're going to be interviewing someone in this seat that's going to be talking to you about season 50.

You picked up cyber thriller Eye Candy, but you're scrapping the Catherine Hardwicke-helmed pilot and recasting all but star Victoria Justice. Why?

I'm hoping to create MTV's version of CSI. That's really what I want. And in the end, our pilot focused on too much backstory of the character. I can't remember the exact storylines in the different CSI pilots, but I'm fairly confident that they didn't linger on too much backstory. They just got to it, and that's what I think we need to do. [Teen Wolf producer Christian Taylor will take over as showrunner.]

You're married to a writer, and you dabbled as a producer (NBC's Hidden Hills). How have those experiences impacted you as a network executive?

There was this very good pilot that Dick Wolf did for me when I was at WB, which was called D.C. I distinctly remember he called me after he had sent me the pilot and asked me what I thought of it. The very first thing I said was, "Why didn't you shoot this one particular scene that was in the script that I loved?" Later, after I left WB, I briefly tried my hand at producing with Hidden Hills, and it brought me back to that moment because after I'd been in the trenches -- even more than being married to someone in the trenches -- I could appreciate that there were a billion reasons he might not have been able to shoot that scene: It rained that day, they couldn't get a permit, something happened with the actor. And really, the very first thing you should say when someone delivers a pilot is, "Thank you for all the hard work, and here are all the things I really liked about it. Then maybe launch into a few questions you might have." I do it differently now.

You've worked at several networks. What was the most memorable pitch that you've sat through?

I was pitched Fear Factor [at The WB]. I distinctly remember their examples: They were going to send people running across a football field with wild dogs chasing them to see how far they could get before the wild dogs knocked them over; or they were going to have people walk over alligators and crocodiles who were hungry. It was one horrifying example after another of how they were going to torture contestants, and I was like, "Not on my network you're not!" I remember thinking, "Get out of my office with this trash!" And then the next thing I heard was NBC had bought it and made a big commitment, and I was like, "What did I miss? I don't understand." (Laughs.)

Canceling or passing on shows is a piece of the job that few enjoy. How do you say no?

In college I majored in English and minored in psychology, and while I didn't have a specific plan to be a TV executive I really feel both have helped me in this job. English in terms of appreciating great storytelling and psychology in terms of the number of passes I've had to do in my career. Trying to pass on people who put their heart and soul into shows is extremely hard. And I know how disappointed I was to have NBC pass on Hidden Hills after season one. But I call them and I'm honest. Sometimes the honesty is appreciated, and sometimes it falls on deaf ears, which I understand.

What's your best Lorne Michaels story?

I remember the night we premiered Wayne's World. Lorne is the person who decides which sketches come back, and I remember very confidently watching Wayne's World in that rehearsal and thinking to myself, "We'll never see that again!" I just thought it was the stupidest sketch I'd ever seen. And then, of course, not only was it back -- and as the very first sketch the following week -- but the next thing I knew Paramount was calling Lorne about developing it as a movie. How I thought I'd be competent for this job, I'll never know.

You made your acting debut on the series finale of The Office. Is there a side gig in your future?

No! Each of my kids was in an episode, and I'd never been in it. Greg asked me if I wanted to do it, and I said no, but then he asked me a second time in front of the kids. They kept saying, "Oh my God, you have to do it Mom!" I can't remember how many takes we did, but I was exhausted, and all I had to do was sit there!