

News

April 16, 2007

Cable Net Gains Sales Expert

Documentary Channel Hires McGowan to Sell Advertising

By Jon Lafayette

"Billion Dollar" Bill McGowan is back, selling ads for the nascent Documentary Channel. Mr. McGowan, the former head of sales for Discovery Communications who used to make headlines with his predictions of 10-digit increases in cable advertising revenue, is hawking the year-old network's flexibility in tailoring customized programming and marketing packages as a selling point.

For example, Documentary Channel worked with the Environmental Protection Agency's Energy Star program to produce a 25-minute documentary called "emPOWERed," which will premiere April 22 as part of the network's new "EarthView" block of environmentally green programming. With green programming hot right now, Mr. McGowan expects other sponsors to be interested in the block as well.

The willingness to create original programming and accommodate messages of varying sizes is one way to get clients to take a look at a network with only 13.5 million subscribers, mostly on EchoStar Communications' Dish Network. Some of the network's programming also is carried by WNYC-TV in New York and by PBS-affiliated stations around the country.

Mr. McGowan got hooked up with Documentary Channel nine months ago while visiting his son Patrick, a student at Vanderbilt. Patrick McGowan was working as a caddy when he met Documentary Channel founder and CEO Tom Neff. Mr. Neff mentioned that the network was having difficulty landing sponsors, and Mr. McGowan suggested that perhaps his dad could help. (Patrick McGowan also parlayed the meeting into a job: He's an account executive at the channel.)

Dad played some golf with Mr. Neff and signed on as president and CEO of Documentary Channel Media Partners, which sells the ads for the channel. He also made an investment in the channel. The channel is independent and privately held.

"I thought, 'This is a great little network,' and it reminded me of the early days of Discovery," Mr. McGowan said.

In fact, Mr. McGowan said Mr. Neff reminded him of Discovery founder John Hendricks. Both had a vision and were creative, he said.

In 15 years at Discovery, Mr. McGowan helped grow ad sales from \$39 million to \$1 billion. He left in 2005 after Billy Campbell, former president of Discovery Networks U.S., brought in Joe Abruzzese from CBS above Mr. McGowan as head of sales.

Mr. McGowan said Documentary Channel also is similar to Discovery because of its audience of upscale, curious viewers.

"It's a very high-quality environment," and with just five minutes of commercials per hour, a fairly uncluttered one to boot, he said.

This time of year, Mr. McGowan is itching to get back into the upfront fray. He said he is hoping to do some upfront deals with some of the marketers that have already sponsored programming on the channel.

Sam Adams beer has done a deal in which the filmmakers at the channel have produced customized interstitial material that runs between documentaries.

When Paramount Pictures was launching the Oliver Stone film "World Trade Center," Documentary Channel was airing a series called "New York Stories" about Big Apple neighborhoods. A sponsorship deal came together after Mr. Stone saw that it was a good fit, Mr. McGowan said.

For Acura, the network created another series of interstitials that consisted of on-screen billboards noting the sponsorship and showing one of the automaker's vehicles driving across the lower third of the screen.