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Multicamera sitcoms move off the endangered species list
as CBS re-energizes this classic technique

How Many Cameras Does It Take to Get a Laugh?

If there were an endangered species list for television, the traditional sitcom would sit right at the top. This September, the five broadcast networks will return 15 comedies to the airwaves and launch six new ones. At 21 half-hours, it's the lowest combined fall total in decades, if not in television history. But as the home to TV's current top two comedies, *Two and a Half Men* and *Rules of Engagement*, and now with the introduction of *The Big Bang Theory* from Men's co-creator Chuck Lorre, CBS is working hard to keep the lights on in comedy.

"Comedy is really hard to do and get right," says CBS Vice President of Comedy Development Wendi Trilling. "But I don't feel the comedy genre is as broken as other networks do, because they don't have *Two and a Half Men*."



The Big Bang Theory: Brainy best friends Leonard (Johnny Galecki, right) and Sheldon (Jim Parsons, left) with their sexy single neighbor, Penny (Kaley Cuoco, center).



Two and a Half Men: Alan (Jon Cryer), Jake (Angus T. Jones) and Charlie (Charlie Sheen).

Breaking with Tradition?

In recent seasons, as small-screen writers began to tire of the physical restrictions imposed by three-walled sitcom sets and wacky-neighbor entrances, the trend in network television has swung toward single-camera sitcoms—that is, shows shot without live audiences, off the studio soundstages. CBS has some of those in development, too, for midseason debut. "This year in particular, writers were telling us that they like the creative challenge and freedom of working on single-camera shows," Trilling says. "And so we ended up filming more single-camera pilots than usual, because that's what we got pitched. We can only dictate so much if we want to be in business with the best writers."

Suddenly Single

In truth, this newer, more premium-cable-like breed of single-camera comedies has as high, if not higher, failure rate on network TV than its multicamera cousins. According to Trilling, it doesn't seem audiences are particularly interested in this edgier single-camera subgenre. "[The] audience doesn't think about it that way ... worrying about how a show is shot," she says. "They are just looking for a show they can connect to and find funny."

Trilling sees a future CBS with room for both types of comedy, pointing out that in the past the network had a monster single-camera hit in *M*A*S*H* as well as multicamera standard-bearers *I Love Lucy*, *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, *Everybody Loves Raymond* and now *Two and a Half Men*. In general, she says, CBS traditionally has aired more of the multicamera variety, and so more multicamera comedies have been among the network's biggest hits. "Shows like *The Office* may have a niche following, but when a multicamera show works, it tends to work on a bigger scale and be a bigger, more accessible hit," she says.

The Picks and the Pendulum

In a sign that Hollywood's pendulum may be swinging back the other way, Trilling recalls the days this past

Multicamera Hits

Although much of the television industry has been shying away from the classic multicamera filming style, CBS is sticking to the time-honored approach that helped to catapult shows such as *I Love Lucy* to superstardom. Here is a look at a few famous CBS sitcoms that have stuck to their guns:

I Love Lucy (1951–1957)

Starring the redheaded queen of comedy Lucille Ball and her then-husband Desi Arnaz, *I Love Lucy* was the first TV sitcom to employ the three-camera filming technique.

All in the Family (1971–1979)

The No. 1 show in prime time for five seasons, *All in the Family* implemented a multicamera system to allow actors to perform entire scenes before studio audiences.

Two and a Half Men (2003–Present)

Nominated for Emmy awards in 2006 and 2007 for multicamera production design excellence, this sitcom mixes love and laughs to tell the tale of family dynamics between two brothers and a son.



Rules of Engagement, co-starring Patrick Warburton and Megyn Price, is one of the most recent CBS sitcoms to keep the multicamera tradition alive.

spring, following the successful launch of CBS' most recent comedy hit, *Rules of Engagement*. "When that show did well, I can't tell you how many calls I got from people saying, 'We want to do a multicamera show, so thank God you are and it's working!'" she says.

So despite the genre's current endangered status, Trilling is bullish about network comedy. "It's still a very viable form of entertainment that will continue to make hits," she says. "And when it works it works in a big way that can be very creatively and financially rewarding for everybody." 📺

Marianne: Max Licht

MO Knows Television



From shares to demos, our ratings expert answers your questions

As director of media research for the CBS Network, Marianne O'Leary is on the front lines of the TV-ratings race. The 10-year veteran, whose knowledge of network programming rivals that of the most battle-hardened executive, breaks down the numbers for CBS brass every morning, day and weekend, giving the lowdown on everything from how CBS shows did the night before to what the competition looked like. She took a break from the daily grind to answer a few of your questions about television.

Question: "It seems a lot of programs claim to be No. 1 in something, but is there some entity policing these claims to make sure they are factual?"

Marianne O'Leary: As a rule, when a network or a program claims to be No. 1 on-air, the claim is made based on the average viewer delivery—and Nielsen can ask for documentation supporting the claim. If there seems to be a lot of programs claiming to be No. 1 these days, it is because different programs have that position in different categories. *American Idol* Wednesday, for example, is TV's No. 1 program. *CSI* is TV's No. 1 drama. *Desperate Housewives* is Sunday's No. 1 program. All of these No. 1 claims are true because of the different qualifiers.

Q: "Is it true that advertisers only want to reach viewers 18-49?"

MO: Some advertisers are looking to reach viewers 18 to 49, but not

all advertisers are targeting just that demographic. Video game manufacturers may be looking at a demographic of viewers 12 to 24. Investment and retirement funds may be interested in upscale viewers 25 to 54. Pharmaceutical firms may be targeting viewers 35 and up. While many advertisers are looking for the 18- to 49-year-old viewers, just as many are looking at younger and older viewers when marketing their products.

Q: "Recently, I heard a lot about the Upfronts. What are they?"

MO: In May every year, the broadcast networks announce their new fall lineups to the press and the advertising community in "upfront presentations." These presentations showcase the networks' new series and herald the successes of the returning programs. Once the different lineups are in place, the ad agencies start negotiating with each network for commercial time "upfront," or before the new television season begins.

Over the years, the upfront presentations have attracted not only the stars from a network's new or most successful series, but big-name entertainment. In recent years, CBS has had Mariah Carey, Faith Hill, Celine Dion, Aretha Franklin and The Who all perform at Carnegie Hall—where the network makes its annual upfront presentation.

To have Marianne answer your TV questions, send an e-mail to ask.marianne@cbs.com 📺