

# Recession-Proof Reality?

## How Reality TV Will Fare in the Gloomy Economic Climate

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*Author of Reality Check: The Business and Art of Producing Reality TV (Focal Press 2008). At age 13, Michael ventured into the lowly world of local cable television by hosting a show from his parents' basement in Valparaino, Indiana. Essany turned his little talk show, The Michael Essany Show, into a multimillion dollar project that quickly became one of the most talked-about reality television shows in America. By the time he was 21, he had appeared on The Tonight Show, Oprah, CNN, ET, and Access Hollywood, to name a few.*

Speaking to a gaggle of reporters at a recent CBS programming gala, Hollywood mega producer and reality show guru Mark Burnett assured both his colleagues and the inquiring media that the best days of “Survivor” were ahead of the longtime reality program, not behind it.

Surprisingly, for the producer who has almost single-handedly pulled the strings of every long-lasting network reality program of the past decade, it still took a bit of convincing for some reporters to believe that reality TV itself isn't on life support. As far as they can tell, sales of spot advertising have “proven sluggish” since the start of the fall 2008 television season. And although most TV ads are sold months earlier during the spring season, more than a few cash-strapped advertisers have raised the prospect of backing out of their commitments.

In recent months, some have speculated that the slumping US economy is poised to hit Hollywood as hard as it's hit main street America. In a relatively short period of time, we've seen marketing dollars dry up for major advertisers in major venues. NASCAR, as a prime example, has lost a valuable inventory of sponsors in light of companies now insufficiently capitalized to have their logo emblazoned on racecars.



If the U.S. economy sustains a long recession, some say the deficit of advertisers may similarly result in a surplus of unemployed television producers. As a frequent guest lecturer in college class rooms and at industry forums, I am not only conscious of the swelling number of aspiring young television producers eager to break into the business, I am also acutely aware of their growing anxiety over the perceived “production drought” that supposedly may befall the business of reality television.

Despite the ominous outlook that has seeped into trade publications and cocktail party conversation, I believe there is actually good cause for optimism. Although I recognize the correlation between struggling economies with struggling advertisers, I don’t anticipate reality television suffering any great casualties, except for those who lack a fundamental understanding of how this format really works and survives through reinvention.

Reality television programming is a proven, cost-effective alternative to scripted programming. So if the economic downturn worsens and continues putting pressure on advertisers, it is a safer bet than any gamble on Wall Street that we will see more reality TV, not less.

Notwithstanding a slight but noticeable drop off in viewership over the last few seasons, “Survivor” remains a consistent ratings winner in its time slot. It has also never failed to generate hundreds of millions of dollars in advertising revenue for CBS on an annual basis.

But reality television is now at a critical juncture; a situation born of both a weary viewing public and a general malaise resulting from tough times across many sectors. And, while it can be intimidating for both new and established producers in the business to latch on to any considerable optimism in a time of transparent gloom, there is actually no shortage of available opportunity, particularly for those who realize that the power of reality television lies in the ability to relate to the mood of the masses. So, in this regard, there’s never been a better time to be in or get into this business.

Reality TV thrives on real time. Since its birth, the genre has reflected the current trends and moods of the viewing public. And those who found success behind the camera lens have been the first to hit a nerve and tap into the widespread sentiment of television viewers.

Something tells me that the first reality TV producer that comes up with a program concept like “Sink the CEO,” in which the much reviled stereotypical Wall Street CEO is forced to endure hell on a deserted island after his yacht is torpedoed by a bunch of laid off-blue collar workers, will probably make more money in 2009 than even Mark Burnett will.

As we’ve witnessed repeatedly, reality television is the most malleable programming format ever devised in broadcast media. In both good times and in bad, unscripted programming can be cultivated into a crutch – a feel-good and excusable guilty-pleasure that entertains, inspires, and momentarily aids the viewer in forgetting their troubles or taking out their frustrations.

So while “The Apprentice” would not likely maintain its high ratings perch in troubled economic times such as these, the industry is ripe for an entire new slate of shows and concepts to revitalize a format that isn’t dead, but certainly is tired. For producers looking to one-up the established network of big-time producers, such a time of transition and opportunity can be parlayed into long lasting success, even if rooted in a short term “programming gimmick” like capitalizing on the somber mood of the nation at present.





Astonishingly, many reality programs are created to have a minimal shelf life. Thanks in part to their relative ease of inexpensive production, reality series can be used for a quick source of revenue, a platform for promoting other projects, or even a means for engendering short-term attention or controversy for a broader purpose. Best of all, even when advertising dollars are scarce, companies will still find a way to scrounge up the cash for an ad when a really hot idea comes down the shoot from a major cable or television network.

From this perspective it's easy to see how reality television has remained so consistently popular. For all intents and purposes, the format is just as favorable with networks producing them as the viewers who adore them. Simply put, the attractiveness of reality television signifies a workable marriage of convenience and contentment between networks and viewers. For the vast television audience desirous of relatable, contemporary, and highly emotional entertainment, reality TV is the answer. Equally, for programming executives habitually grappling with slumping ratings and rising expenses, reality TV presents an affordable remedy for programming ailments facing the network.

Unscripted programming, for example, doesn't require a team of highly compensated writers. In this regard, the 2007–2008 might have actually resulted in a counterproductive consequence. During this period networks realized that unscripted programming was enormously well-liked among contemporary audiences. Not helping the writers was the stark realization that it frequently costs upwards of three million dollars to produce a single episode of scripted drama or comedy. Reality programming, on the other hand, can be produced in most cases for well under a million dollars per episode.

At the beginning of the fall 2007 writer's strike, some cynically speculated that networks may actually be pleased with the strike. The picketing of union writers provided a compelling excuse for launching more reality programs while simultaneously canning a bouquet of scripted programs that are more expensive to produce and largely less profitable than most reality shows. Ironically, it was the previous writer's strike of 1988 that introduced viewing audiences to a wide arrangement of new reality television programs including *Cops*, a forerunner of many modern unscripted series.

Historically, periods of turmoil, transition, and societal mood swings have been a boon for reality television. Such phases have allowed the industry to flourish and welcome with open arms new talent with fresh ideas capable of fusing public sentiment with the only programming genre proficient at reflecting the pulse of the public.

Love it or hate it, reality television isn't going anywhere soon. And if you're among the legions trying to pitch and produce in this highly accessible industry, disregard any former delusions of reality TV's demise and, instead, put your mind to picking up the creative slack that runs rampant in television today.

Instead of focusing on developing innovative concepts and programs that serve as a conduit to the new emotions smoldering in the same old audience, producers at CBS, for example, will likely continue to milk every dime out of "Survivor" until it dies. During the early stages of an economic slowdown, a creative drought is experienced before the boom. Needless to say, now is the time to write, develop, and pitch while every network and cable outlook slowly comes to the realization that new producers with new ideas will be the lifeblood of reality television's next successful wave.



For the first time in a generation, the world as a whole is hungry for real change. And perhaps nowhere is this universal truth more transparent than in the world of reality television. For this reason, the outlook for this genre as well as the prospects for creative producers capable of breathing new life into the medium's oldest programming format have never been more promising.

Anyone who argues to the contrary is in need of a serious reality check.