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The High Road



In a world full of pessimism, audiences are increasingly turning to programs that offer them an uplifting approach to life.

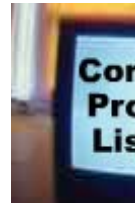
By Bill Dunlap

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A growing number of television producers and distributors are descending upon MIPTV with expanding lists of nonfiction programming designed to uplift and improve the lives of their audiences. Distributors of programs with self-help, self-improvement, spiritual and religious themes say interest in this type of material has grown quickly in recent years. They point to the success of shows like *Dr. Phil* in the U.S. and to the popularity of books and magazines on similar subjects.

"Lifestyle is huge for us," says Stéphanie Röckmann-Portier, VP of sales and the head of factual programs for Alliance Atlantis. "We have seen an increase in demand for these kinds of shows."

Röckmann-Portier adds that several factors are contributing to this demand. One is the continuing popularity of reality television, which "has given a completely different kind of spin on lifestyle programming." Another is the number of new niche cable and satellite channels aimed at women. "They're popping up everywhere," she says. "They have a huge demand for these kinds of shows. There are territories where these shows appeal to the specialty channels. There are others





WSN Inc., the parent company of World Screen, is the publisher of the International Emmys' official almanac. For more information, [click here.](#)

where there aren't specialty channels, but where the commercial broadcasters have a lot of lifestyle shows. Some territories have both."

Röckmann-Portier cites three series that typify the genre: *Crash Test Mommy*, *Sexy Girl* and *Design Rivals*. "*Crash Test Mommy* puts a completely different angle on being a mom," she says. "It makes the family realize how important their mom is to them, and it makes the mom realize how important she is to them. It makes others realize what a tough job it is to be a mom." The show puts novice caregivers into the role of surrogate mother for two days. In each hour-long episode, the stand-in parent deals with situations like meal preparation, the laundry, emotional meltdowns, bedtime readings and housecleaning, while the real mom is whisked away for 48 hours of personal pampering.

"*Sexy Girl* is a personal makeover show," Röckmann-Portier says. "One of the reasons this is so successful is because self-improvement is...something that people relate to and aspire to. It's a show that is looking at a way to achieve personal improvement. It's a very female thing to do."

Design Rivals is a home-décor-makeover series in which a pair of interior decorators analyze someone's personality and argue out how they perceive the person and what surroundings would suit his or her lifestyle.

While these kinds of programs represent only a small part of Alliance Atlantis's catalogue, the Miami-based Animus Entertainment Group is devoting itself to the genre. Damaris Valero is the founder and CEO of the two-year-old company. "We're a company that focuses on well-being, health-related programming, but also with an emphasis on reality," she says. "Always with a positive outlook on life, where you can take something from the shows with you."

Valero adds that Animus has researched the health and well-being business thoroughly and sees great potential in it, through television and other segments. "Looking at it from a business point of view, it is estimated that it will be a \$1 trillion business by 2010," Valero says. "This is definitely way, way bigger than television. Television is always [responding to] a trend that is going on in the world, and once television producers pick up on those things, they bring it to TV and TV brings viral growth."

We're starting with television product because we believe that's the way to get to the masses first. Our real intent, once we get into the television side of it, is to sort of multiply that formula into publishing and licensing and merchandising with an international point of view."

Valero also sees reality television giving a boost to the kinds of shows Animus produces. "Reality has had ups and downs," she explains. "I think where it's headed now is toward reality that brings less conflict and a more positive outlook to life, where people feel that it's bringing families together. It's about transforming yourself. The trend we're seeing has already happened in the publishing industry. We think the wellness industry will be a major force in the business over the next ten years."

Valero cites the Animus series *21 Days* as an example of that kind of programming. Its message is that individuals can break bad habits and embrace desirable ones in 21 days. Each episode features real people who are struggling to lose weight, living with an addiction or trying to control spending.

"Over 90 percent of people everywhere suffer from some form of addiction," Valero says—"maybe too much TV, chocolate, caffeine, shopping, etc.—and habits, like people who bite their nails. They don't know how to get rid of them. In the show we take a person through a discipline of multiple experts on natural and holistic ways where we give them a different approach without pills, patches or anything chemical."

The show is offered in English and in Spanish, and as a format. "Reality-based formats are primarily for the U.S., but countries that have expressed interest are the U.K. and France," Valero says. "Relationship-based shows can travel, but mostly to larger, industrialized countries. Canada is on top of the list. The U.S. is our primary market. It's our solid base and where we're bringing off a lot of these ideas. Our plan is to first secure deals in the U.S. and soon after to be able to secure international deals, primarily with Europe and Latin America, then Asia."

LIFESTYLE NICHE

Oasis International, based in Toronto, is a more broad-based program distributor, but with a lifestyle and factual segment that includes some self-improvement offerings.

Steve Murphy, a VP of sales and acquisitions, doesn't see widespread interest in this kind of programming yet, but he says the growth of lifestyle channels like Fine Living in the U.S. are likely to boost the genre.

"A lot of the niche channels are opening up," he says, "whether it's a general sort of lifestyle channel or something like Fine Living, which is more about general wealth and living your life better. Those kinds of channels are picking up on that trend. The recent development is that while it was once just a niche on a general lifestyle channel, there are now lifestyle channels devoted to this niche. They're reacting to trends in retail and books. I don't know how widespread that is, but Fine Living would probably be the driving force behind that expanding globally...and it's a moderate success." Fine Living, which bills itself as a channel that "inspires and empowers people to live better," was launched in March 2002 by Scripps Networks, the company behind Home & Garden Television and other cable channels. It says it is available in 23 million U.S. homes.

Two Oasis series that Murphy says are doing well are *Mind, Body & Spirit* and *Spiritual Journey*. "They are more than health-and-wellness shows," he says. "To some extent they're spiritual, but by no means religious. It's not a huge part of our business by any stretch, but it's definitely a trend that's bubbling under the surface."

Mind, Body & Spirit is a half-hour series on alternative health, nutrition and the body. It also features regular segments presenting practical information on vitamins, minerals and herbal supplements, book reviews and author interviews, as well as experts who provide easy day-to-day tips. *Spiritual Journey* profiles people overcoming hurdles in life. "In every half hour there are two different stories about people who have met some impasse in their lives, usually some kind of midlife crisis, or have just felt unfulfilled in their lives in general, and they've thought out some kind of solution in a spiritual way, not necessarily religious," Murphy says.

Re: Source Media, also in Toronto, has taken a unique approach to self-improvement with its *Karma Trekkers* series, which mixes travel with personal growth, offering what the company calls "a mystical journey of self-discovery to locations of spiritual, cultural or historical significance."

"It's about the experience of the journey more than the destination itself," says Kevin Fox, Re:Source's CEO. "It's about the people you meet along the way, the little personal stories and experiences set against the backdrop of locations around the world that are magnets for people seeking different kinds of experiences. It's part of a genre that reflects somewhat of a change in values, change of a mind-set for viewers. They have the beautiful visuals and exotic locations, but you also have those personal stories, anecdotal journey elements that allow it to connect with people." The look of the show, shot in high-definition, is that of a high-end travel show or documentary, Fox says. "The end look is the big sweeping vistas and the big visuals and the historical perspective you might see in a documentary and a lot of the intimate little quirky moments you might see in a travelogue."

In the U.S., the series has been picked up by the niche channel WealthTV, and it is distributed internationally by CABLEready. "It appeals to that 40-something lawyer or 50-something dentist," Fox says. "It appeals to that 30-something who has just started a career who wants more than lying on a beach for two weeks as a vacation." The first six episodes were shot in Peru, Malta, South Africa, Bali, Myanmar and Ireland.

Re:Source Media is co-producing with WealthTV a second series, called *Well Spent*, which is about the elements of a well-spent life. "It continues in this same vein, taking a much more organic, more balanced look at life," Fox says. "The tagline is 'Passion, Inspiration and Celebration.' The first segment features a monk in Thailand who is an American and has lived there for 20 years. It's about Buddhism and the experience of being an American in Thailand and rising to such a preeminent position in a Buddhist monastery."

FAMILY AND RELIGION

VisionTV International, the new joint venture of VisionTV and Ellis Entertainment, will bring to MIPTV a new series of 26 half hours called *Divine Restoration*. The program is being produced for TV One in the U.S., a new lifestyle-and-entertainment network for African-American adults, and for VisionTV, a multi-faith and multicultural broadcaster in Canada.

Restoration, which is still in production, is described as an "uplifting makeover show in which community churches

receive some much-needed tender loving care." It focuses on a series of 48-hour church-renovation projects in several congregations. According to Stephen Ellis, VisionTV International's president, it will be sold not only as a program but also as a format "that will appeal to churches that are actively involved in their community."

VisionTV is also currently working on a documentary series of six half-hours, *The Lost Gods*, scheduled for completion this summer and for distribution by MIPCOM. For this venture, the company has partnered with the Dublin-based Title Films and is shooting in high-definition video under the Ireland Canada Co-Production Treaty. The series, which delves into the religions underpinning six powerful empires that have ruled in the past, will be produced in three languages—English, Irish and Welsh—giving it some unique and automatic distribution possibilities. TG4 (Ireland) and S4C (Wales) are involved in the funding. According to Ellis, *Restoration and Gods* are only the "first two projects out of the gate" resulting from the VisionTV/Ellis joint venture.

Another company moving to the spiritual side is MarVista Entertainment, known primarily as a distributor of family fare. "We distribute quite a lot of projects that have underlying religious themes or tones," says the managing director, Fernando Szew. "We've found a strong market on the animated side with titles that are religious-themed, holiday-related or biblical stories." Programs include *Joseph and the Coat of Many Colors* and *Prince of the Nile: The Story of Moses*.

"They're recognizable stories that translate well for broadcasters and viewers," Szew says. "In several parts of the world, in particular the United States, Latin America and southern Europe, there is a consumer base for this kind of programming. It's a growing base and a very firm base. They're very loyal."

MarVista is also offering *The Singles Ward*, a two-hour live-action movie that uses humor with uplifting effect. The protagonist is a stand-up comic who seems to have the perfect life until his wife leaves him. With his confidence and conviction in his family-friendly faith shaken, he tackles the singles scene and eventually gets back in touch with his religion.

Szew says interest in religious-themed programming is nothing new, but that it has been stoked lately by

phenomena like Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* and the *Left Behind* books. "There is a bigger consciousness for it now, but the base has always been solid and been there," he says. "Now some of the things that are values-based are translating more to the mainstream, especially in the U.S. but also in other countries."

A famous animated religious show that was church-sponsored and given away to television stations to spread the faith—the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America's *Davey and Goliath*—may be on the verge of a comeback, according to church officials. "In December, we debuted our first new animation in 30 years, *Davey and Goliath's Snowboard Christmas*," says the Rev. Eric C. Shafer, the director of the church's department for communication.

The original series consisted of 65 15-minute episodes and six half-hour specials produced between 1960 and 1975 by Art and Ruth Clokey in the same stop-motion animation as they used in their *Gumby* cartoons. The series was distributed internationally with versions in Spanish, Portuguese and German. The hour-long Christmas special for the Hallmark Channel in the U.S. was produced by the Clokeys' son Joe Clokey on a budget of close to \$1 million, Shafer says.

"*Davey and Goliath* was always produced by the Lutheran Church and always about God's love for children and the wisdom of parents," Shafer says. "The basic plot is always the same: Davey gets in trouble, his dog Goliath is his conscience, Mom and Dad save the day and Davey learns a lesson."

Last Easter Sunday, Hallmark aired the 1967 Easter special, and the church is restoring all the old tapes. There are no immediate plans to distribute the show, but Shafer says international distribution is a long-range goal.

BIBLE, BUDDHISM AND ISLAM

A considerable amount of religion-related programming is offered by the Austrian Broadcasting Corporation (ORF), which produces 95 hours a year of such material. The most successful of these programs tend to be documentaries about different religions followed by in-studio discussions or by portraits of controversial religious personalities.

One of the highlights last year was *Seven Deadly Sins*, a film project made in cooperation with the Vienna Film

Academy. Seven young filmmakers each produced a film about one of the seven deadly sins. (The ratings winner was *Lust*.) ORF's religion program partners are the Bayerische Rundfunk for documentaries and ZDF for the transmission of church masses.

A highlight of ORF's MIPTV offerings is *Active Buddha: Another Face of Thailand*, from the filmmaker Tatjana Falath. The program shows that, in addition to being meditative, Thai Buddhism is also active and socially oriented. About 95 percent of Thais are Buddhists, and the country has over 30,000 convents and 200,000 monks—most of them "temporary." The film also delves into other aspects of Thai life, including the Luang-Ta-Boua forest monastery, which is dedicated to the protection of tigers; an internationally acknowledged holy order that offers therapy involving a secret herbal blend to drug addicts from all over the world; and a nunnery devoted to orphan care.

Yet another approach to spirituality is taken by Faith & Values Media in the U.S. "Our mission is building bridges among cultures...to explore, explain and entertain," says Madeline McEneney, the head of international and domestic sales and licensing. "We don't just produce; we also acquire for television and distribute [for] outside producers."

One of Faith & Values Media's programs, the documentary *Listening to Islam*, has been doing particularly well. "It's about the American Muslims' point of view. And that's our key thing: trying to accept other faiths. Then there is *Sacrifice at Sea*, which is about a rabbi, a Catholic priest, and two Protestant chaplains who gave up their life preservers to soldiers who were all on a ship that was going down in the ocean. It's a true story of World War II. It gives you goose bumps. This story was actually picked up by the U.S. Army chaplain corps," says McEneney. "They felt it showed their story so well that they're using it in recruiting and to make their own people aware of their heritage. It's that inspiring."

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