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Soaring ratings prove Disney Channel has what it takes

By David Kronke, Television Critic



A "Romeo & Juliet" story set to music, the tale of twin brothers growing up in a ritzy Boston hotel, and the weekly antics of girls named Hannah and Raven just trying to live normal lives in their abnormal worlds have helped create the top-rated network for kids 6 to 14.

This summer, Disney Channel has been breaking its own ratings records on an almost-weekly basis. July saw the cable network achieving an all-time high in viewers, and on July 28, a stunt evening of crossover appearances featuring characters from the series "Hannah Montana," "That's So Raven" and "The Suite Life of Zack & Cody" resulted in the three most-watched episodes in the channel's history.



"They have a wonderful overview of what they're supposed to be — good programming for kids, for families, so that you don't have to worry about what your kids are watching," 21-year-old Raven-Symone, star of "That's So Raven" and the TV film "Cheetah Girls 2," which debuts Aug. 25, says of her employers.

In its youthful demographics — the network targets young children, ages 6 through 11, during the day, and tweens, ages 9 through 14, in the evening — Disney

Channel has posted gains of nearly 20 percent to 30 percent from its viewership levels of last year.

It has been the No. 1 network for those demographics for at least 16 consecutive months, but it's adding older viewers as well.

"I've seen people in college who watch it, and why wouldn't you want to watch something where you don't have to worry about seeing blood being spewed everywhere or people being mad at each other?" adds Raven-Symone. "I think it's wonderful what they're doing — and keeping it consistent, because if you don't, you lose fans."

Disney Channel's dance to serious ratings growth began in January, when it debuted its original film "High School Musical," a stylish romantic comedy about two teens from different backgrounds — one academic, one athletic — hoping to win roles in their school's theatrical production.

Since then, "High School Musical" has been seen by nearly 40 million viewers and produced both the year's best-selling CD and DVD.

A sequel is slated for next year.

This represents significant growth from the channel's first programming day — April 18, 1983 — which began with an array of short cartoons.

Gary Marsh, entertainment president of the network, says that it was apparent early on that "High School Musical" represented a step forward for the network.

"As the music started coming in, we started getting excited — we don't usually show dailies to the rest of the office, but as the dance numbers started coming in, the dailies became like contraband being passed around," Marsh recalls. "You certainly got the sense that this was bubbling up into something more than another Disney Channel Original Movie.

"We've been accused of being treacly and saccharine and corny, and if you read some of the 'High School Musical' reviews, all of those words got thrown at us, and if that's what being 'corny' means, to make that kind of connection to our audience, then bring it on," he adds.

Anna Gilman, 13, of Pasadena, who claims to have seen every episode of every Disney Channel series at least once or twice, points to "High School Musical" as a signpost for the channel's popularity. "Once people saw that, I think they would be interested in what else Disney Channel has to offer," she says.

Marsh agrees, adding that the elements that sparked "High School Musical" are evident in all programs produced by Disney Channel.

"There's really five things that inform our development, and this speaks across movies and animated and live-action series.

"One is, we try to showcase real kids in a real-world environment. That's not to say that there can't be some fantastical elements to it, a la (the animated series) 'Kim Possible.' But at their core, there's a real kid going through passages real kids are experiencing on a daily basis. More than anything, I think that's the resonant feature that kids tap into."

"Hannah Montana," currently the network's most popular show, concerns a young girl dumped on at school while leading a double life as a successful pop star. (The network delayed development on the series for six months in order to locate the right actress for the part Miley Cyrus.) "The Suite Life of Zack & Cody" focuses on two carefree troublemakers who live in the hotel where their mother serves as a lounge singer. "That's So Raven," which recently concluded production after reaching 100 episodes (a spinoff featuring Raven's brother, "Corey in the House," debuts in November), stars Raven-Symone as a teen who receives visions of the future, but isn't sure how to react to them.

Secondly, Marsh says his shows' humor must come organically from the characters. "I can get a laugh with an underarm fart anytime," he says. "That's not my goal; my goal is to get a laugh because a character says something that makes my audience laugh.

"The third thing is," he continues, "we try to provide navigational signposts that tell kids how to live their own lives. We tackle stories that exist in every kid's life, like the bully at school, or the punishment for not doing your chores, or sibling rivalry. We try, in an entertaining way, to model behavior that's productive and positive."

Stories must also be emotionally engaging and appropriate to the ages of the characters. Finally, Marsh says, "and this is part of the larger Disney brand: We tell stories that are optimistic, that are hopeful. If you put our shows through that filter, you'll see they're pretty strongly informed by those things."

Marsh acknowledges that appealing to a wide range of kids in various modes of intellectual and emotional development is challenging.

Dr. Charlotte Reznick, educational psychologist and UCLA professor, notes that Disney Channel's programming features "good, old-fashioned values in a cool format, and show kids being vulnerable but hip with life lessons built into the story..."

"I'm trying to hit an age 6-to-14 demo, which is almost impossible to do on one program," he says. "What we try and do is bifurcate the appeal, so that there's something there for younger kids and something there for older kids. If you look at the series, they're created strategically so that there's a younger sibling and an older sibling."

Tweens, in particular, appreciate programming aimed at them, Marsh observes.

"This child is straddling the comfort of wanting to be a child and the rebellious independence of wanting to be a teenager," he says.

"If you can find stories that stitch those two conflicting ideas up together, you all of a sudden tap into their psyche in a way that's unexpected for them, so they feel that you've done something just for them."

Dr. Charlotte Reznick, an educational psychologist and UCLA professor whose Web site, ImageryForKids.com, encourages children to communicate via their imagination, notes that Disney Channel's programming features "good, old-fashioned values in a cool format, and show kids being vulnerable but hip with life lessons built into the story. ... I think the kids appreciate the guidance in a hip format. Of course kids want to be part of this Disney family."

Sarah Gilman, 10, younger sister to Anna, attributes the network's success to the fact that "they're making new shows every year — and maybe it's because they want to find more shows with kids with different personalities to watch."

Both girls note that the network's interstitial material featuring regular kids discussing their passions helps viewers relate to the network. Anna says, "I definitely could be on the ones where they show their animals. One, because I have a lot, and two, I love animals."

Identifying with those on the channel — either the characters on the series or the kids who appear during the breaks — is an essential part of Disney Channel's appeal for its fans, Raven-Symone declares.

"It makes them feel connected," she says. "The kids feel comfortable in this world."

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