

Happier Days at NATPE

Crowd is upbeat; business gets done



Unlike at last year's gathering in New Orleans, the show floor during last week's NATPE convention in Las Vegas felt crowded on Sunday and Monday.

BY PAIGE ALBINIAK AND P.J. BEDNARSKI

TV stars, big-name executives and drag queens graced the floor at the annual gathering of the National Association of Television Program Executives in Las Vegas last week, making the convention seem more like the huge party it has been in years past.

Attendees thronged King World's booth to meet the cast of *Everybody Loves Raymond*, while Twentieth's suite was crowded with executives looking to shake hands with 24 star Kiefer Sutherland. Drag queens were auditioning for a cooking show—that, somehow, was the concept.

Compared with last year's moribund show in New Orleans, this year's gathering was more festive, and several syndicators reported that significant business was written.

"I'm getting a very good reaction," said NATPE President and CEO Rick Feldman as the first show under his command wound down. "People have been very enthusiastic and supportive. It's the best environment they can remember in a long time, and it's a good starting place as we change with the business." NATPE held off announcing attendance, but it was likely a little larger than the 7,000 or so who attended the 2003 show.

One group missing from the speakers' list: Washington politicians and regulators. But that was more a scheduling issue than a deliberate decision, sources said.

There were fewer sessions generally, giving attendees more time to visit the floor and suites. With consolidation, it's unlikely the show will ever return to its former craziness, but syndication executives were

kept busy on the floor and in hotel suites.

"This was definitely worth our time," said Paramount Executive Vice President of Sales Mark Dvornik. "Anytime we spend that much time with our clients, it's worth our time. And it exceeded my expectations as far as traffic and volume of business written is concerned."

The convention floor seemed crowded Sunday and Monday.

Show-producer wannabes might not all agree. NATPE organized a pitch tent for nascent TV makers. They began lining up at 8 a.m. on the first day of the three-day show, just to sign the list to get a chance to make their pitch. Only 90 made the cut.

For more established players, logistics were convenient, with the hotel suites in the Venetian not far from the show floor in the Sands Expo Center.

With Sony, NBC, King World, Universal and Carsey-Werner-Mandabach anchoring the floor, attendees had reasons to hang out there. Many top executives strolled the aisles, including CBS Chairman and CEO Leslie Moonves, King World CEO Roger King, Fox Cable Group CEO Tony Vinciguerra, NBC Enterprises President Ed Wilson, Tribune Entertainment President Dick Askin, and Sony Pictures Television President Steve Mosko.

Up in the suites, executives from Warner Bros., Twentieth, Buena Vista and Paramount held meetings and did business. With the suites located around a single hub on the third floor at the Venetian, it was much easier for attendees to get what they came for, and most syndicators were happy with whatever setup they chose. Ironically, Roger King complained that the floor was "too noisy." Last year in New Orleans, everybody complained that it was too quiet.

The trick for NATPE will be to get the same setup or something better for next year. While Las Vegas is an almost ideal location, many other trade organizations think so, too, and it may be tough for NATPE to get a reasonable deal there. The association is looking at holding the convention in other cities, including Miami and San Diego.

"Before I make any decisions about next year," Feldman says, "I have to assess what worked and what didn't work."

Big cities, like Los Angeles or New York, are unlikely candidates because they

don't offer a convention center located close enough to hotel suites.

The other trick will be to keep at least some of the majors on the show floor, because they drive traffic for smaller companies. Warner Bros., Paramount and Buena Vista show no indication of wanting to leave the suites. NATPE will need to work to keep the other majors on the floor. ■



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MARK DVORNIK,
Paramount