

TV CURRENTS

NATPE: Plenty of Buzz, Some Deals

| Syndication | Annual Conference Marked by Renewed Intensity

By Chris Pursell

Not even optimistic syndicators could have guessed the intensity of the business being done at NATPE this year, but in the end, amid speculation on deals for almost every major station group, the real news may be what didn't happen rather than what did.

While Ellen DeGeneres, Jane Pauley, the crew of "Good Day Live" and Jerry Springer joined the bounty of celebrities pressing the flesh on the NATPE floor, missing in action were stars such as Sharon Osbourne, the hosts of "Living It Up! With Ali & Jack" and Ricki Lake. Given that the latter three shows were on the bubble and distributors never announced new clearances, upgrades or renewals for those strips, television's grim reaper seemed to be lurking nearby.

Those potential time slots only fueled the number of meetings and deals that took place in Las Vegas last week, with many executives noting that it reminded them of "the old days" of NATPE, when the conference was all about deals, even if "the old days" were only five years ago.

Only the ABC owned-and-operated stations, which recently



RICK FELDMAN New NATPE president is pleased with his first conference.

signed Buena Vista's Tony Danza talk show, seemed completely protected from rumors and speculation. Numerous sources said the CBS O&Os were in talks for a pickup of Telepictures' Larry Elders project as a replacement for King World's "Living It Up!" despite two-year deals on the freshman strip. Those same sources doubted, however, that Roger King would gladly hand over the time periods.

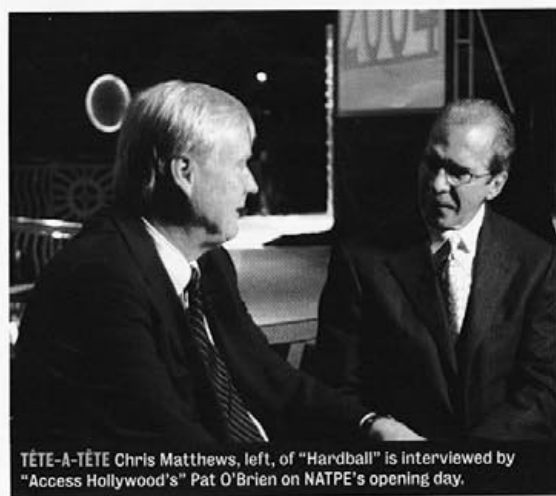
The group that had the most open time slots was strangely quiet at the market, as Fox O&O executives took meetings but walked away without bidding

on a new strip for the fall. The station group continues to be rumored for nearly every new show left in the market. Numerous sightings of incoming station group honcho Lachlan Murdoch only fueled rumors as he explored the conference.

Of course, rumors, buzz and deals are exactly what Rick Feldman, president and CEO of NATPE, hoped for in the first market under his regime. Whether it was people flocking to the floor downstairs or to the suites above, Mr. Feldman said he was dealt a great hand in Las

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TÊTE-A-TÊTE Chris Matthews, left, of "Hardball" is interviewed by "Access Hollywood's" Pat O'Brien on NATPE's opening day.

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Vegas. "The past few years have seen so much consolidation that happened to coincide with a downturn in the economy. NATPE took the brunt of that," he said. "This year we truly saw the first

jumping over it," said Ed Wilson, president of NBC Enterprises. "We are extremely pleased with the number of buyers on the floor and look forward to next year's convention."

John Weiser, incoming NATPE co-chairman and executive VP of Sony Pictures Television, said NATPE executives will try to use the success of the 2004 conference to propel the organization in 2005.

"From Sony's point of view, we had appointments wall-to-wall," he said. "We've got a lot of sales and positive momentum. From a NATPE executive point of view, if we can get one or two more major syndicators on the floor next year, we can only make this conference better."

Sony Pictures Television announced late Friday that the distributor had sold both "Pat Croce: Moving In" and "Life & Style" in television markets representing more than 60 percent of the country for a fall launch. "Pat Croce" is cleared on nine Viacom stations and six of the top 10 markets, while "Life & Style" has found a home in six of the top 10 markets, with clearance on five Viacom stations in the top 10.

Packing 'em in the suites was Twentieth Television, which made the most of the football playoffs Sunday with a viewing room as well as a steady flow of celebrities, including "24's" Kiefer Sutherland, representatives of "Ambush Makeover" and the cast of "Yes, Dear." Executives at Twentieth admitted they were surprised by the turnout throughout the conference.

"This was a NATPE that really could have been a disaster and meant trouble for the organization," said Paul Franklin, executive VP and general sales manager at Twentieth. "But we were surprised and pleased with all the business. Expectations were lower, and Rick really knocked one out of the park." ■



HONORED EXECUTIVE Roger King, right, CEO of CBS Enterprises and King World Productions, receives TelevisionWeek's Syndication Lifetime Achievement Award from TVWeek Publisher Chuck Ross.

big proof that there is a recovery out there, and people are making the most of it."

Mr. Feldman now faces a decision on what to do next with the convention. Talks are ongoing with the Venetian despite initial problems ranging from setup times to the number of rooms being held. But next year's event, according to sources, could take place anywhere.

Although official figures for the convention won't be out for another week or two, syndicators said they saw more station representatives at the market this year than at any time since 2000. High-profile panels helped attendees fill time between meetings.

"Rick was very smart in setting the bar reasonably low and



ED WILSON

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