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From the Los Angeles Times

## TELEVISION

### New Fox hunt: Network seeks shows that appeal to everyone

It hopes 'Back to You' will, like 'Idol,' attract viewers of all ages.

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Veteran television star Kelsey Grammer's new comedy doesn't exactly fit the pedigree of Fox Broadcasting. The network's tastes have long leaned toward the likes of lowly Al Bundy of "Married . . . With Children" or Brian, the sardonic talking dog who downs martinis in Fox's animated hit "Family Guy."

But this fall, Fox is betting big on Grammer's latest sitcom, "Back to You." Comfortably familiar, the show, which debuts tonight, features Grammer as an egotistical local TV news anchor who gets his comeuppance after losing his job in L.A. and returning to his former station in Pittsburgh.

"The edginess is gone," said Peter Sealey, an adjunct marketing professor at the Drucker School of Management at Claremont Graduate University. "Fox started out as a niche player but they have become very mainstream."

"Back to You" underscores Fox's dilemma. Should the network, part of Rupert Murdoch's News Corp. media empire, cast a wide net with traditional shows and established actors that appeal to the populous crowd that flocks to Fox's "American Idol?" Or should it be true to its roots and offer irreverent fare loved by the young viewers that advertisers pay a premium for?

Already, Fox's whiskers are getting a little gray.

Last season, the median age of Fox's audience was 42. Compare that with five years ago, when its median age was 35. To be sure, all of the major broadcasters -- ABC, CBS, NBC and Fox -- are struggling to manage the median age of their audiences, at a time when their core viewers are getting older. Baby boomers, the first generation of Americans who were weaned on TV, are now in their mid-40s, 50s and even early 60s.

The other big networks have older audiences than Fox, but none has aged as quickly.

"It's not so much that Fox has aged up but that Fox has come of age," said Kevin Reilly, president of Fox Entertainment, who joined the company in July. "What you have is Fox truly becoming a broadcast network."

The swift shift in demographics at Fox can be attributed to the No. 1 show in television: "American Idol." For the last three TV seasons, the enormously popular singing contest has lifted Fox to the top of the network heap in ratings among 18- to 49-year-olds, the group that advertisers typically target.

The program last season averaged more than 30 million viewers an episode -- viewers of all ages and from all around the country.

That's more than twice the audience of "American Idol" during its inaugural season in 2002. But as the show's audience has grown, so has the age of its viewers. In the recently completed TV season, the median age of its viewership was 40, up from 32 in its first year.

Long-lasting TV programs rarely attract a younger audience because viewers who stick with a show for several seasons also get older. Fox's terrorist-fighting drama starring Kiefer Sutherland, "24," attracted an audience with a median age of 40 when it launched in 2001. Last season's median age: 46.

TV executives know that older audiences are more loyal, and younger fans are more fickle.

"Networks tend to get older," said David Scardino, an entertainment specialist with Santa Monica-based ad firm RPA. "What happened to Fox was that 'American Idol' came on the air, and all of the sudden they were the top dogs, and they don't want to lose their No. 1 status."

Bingo, said Peter Liguori, Fox's entertainment chairman.

"It's the somewhat soulless goal of being No. 1 in 18 to 49, and then there is the more soulful pursuit of how are you going to get there?" Liguori said.

The trick for Fox is to figure out how to harness the power of "American Idol" without jeopardizing the network's brash and daring image.

Fox must try to duplicate the formula that worked so well for "American Idol," which provides something for everyone. Older viewers love the inspirational nature of the contest as unknown singers get a shot at the big time and blossom before viewers' eyes. Younger audiences delight in the audacity and biting comments of judge Simon Cowell.

"That show brought millions of more customers into the store," Reilly said.

Fox's other recent success story has been "House." The Top 10 show about a crotchety, crippled doctor addicted to painkillers soared in the ratings after being paired with "American Idol." The median age of viewers for "House" is 42, but the drama is also a huge draw for the young.

"House" last season was the No. 2 scripted series among 18- to 34-year-old viewers behind ABC's soapy "Grey's Anatomy." And, among teenagers, it was the No. 1 scripted show.

"Here is a show with a lead actor in his mid-40s, but Dr. Greg House is a guy that youth relate to," Liguori said. "He's a renegade, he's cavalier, he's a rebel, he does things his own way."

Attitude has always been Fox's specialty. Fox Broadcasting launched nearly 21 years ago with "The Late Show Starring Joan Rivers." In April 1987, Fox initiated one night of prime-time programming. One of its original shows was "Married . . . With Children," a comedy about chauvinistic shoe salesman Al Bundy and his lazy wife, Peg.

Within a few years, Fox cemented its edgy reputation with such shows as "In Living Color," "Beverly Hills 90210," "Melrose Place," "The X-Files," "The Simpsons," "Ally McBeal" and "Malcolm in the Middle."

For Fox, the game changer was professional sports. Fox paid handsomely in 1994 for TV rights to NFL games and added Major League Baseball in 1996. Those sports draw large audiences, but they tend to skew older and that has helped to drive up the median age of the network's viewership.

The median age for the NFL football audience is 46. Postseason baseball's viewers are a little older: 49.

Fox has historically floundered in the fourth quarter, when it airs baseball in prime time. It has struggled to find shows that will keep baseball fans tuned in during November and December. Fox is betting that "Back to You" will be a show that appeals to everyone.

Created by two successful comedy writers, Steven Levitan and Christopher Lloyd, who worked together on "Frasier," "Back to You" has gotten praise from critics for writing and for the performances of Grammer and Patricia Heaton, a veteran of "Everybody Loves Raymond."

"The show's funny," said Liguori, explaining why he bought it. He's betting that "Back to You" will score at a time when most new comedies fail.

The familiar feel of "Back to You" could be an advantage.

"Cutting-edge comedies really have had trouble finding an audience," Liguori said. "But audiences are watching more comedy than they have at any other point in the history of television, they are just not watching the new comedies."

Fox also learned a lesson with the quirky "Arrested Development," which appealed to the young and won an Emmy but failed to muster a large audience.

Liguori conceded that he was relieved to have Reilly rejoin him at Fox, after NBC Universal eliminated Reilly's job in May. The two ran News Corp.'s provocative FX channel before Reilly left for NBC.

"He's a fresh set of eyes. I never presented myself as someone who grew up through the development ranks or the creative ranks," Liguori said. "I come at it from a marketer's perspective."

Reilly championed such signature NBC hits as "Heroes" and "The Office" and upstarts such as "30 Rock," which Sunday won the Emmy for best comedy. Liguori is banking on the instincts of his former partner.

"Kevin finds that missing chromosome in a show, which frequently is what sets a show on [a path to] great growth," Liguori said.

"I've missed that dynamic tremendously."

Whether "Back to You" succeeds or fails could provide an answer to a debate within the TV industry -- and Fox. Some executives believe networks should have distinct personalities that are reinforced by their shows. Others argue that a good show could work on any network.

"This is a network that can do a 'Family Guy' and 'House' in the same schedule and I'd like to believe that we can also do 'Back to You,'" Reilly said. "The spirit of the 'In Living Color,' the Al Bundys and the Homer Simpsons -- that will always be the gold standard, and our next cycle will be trying to find the new iteration of those quintessential Fox shows."

"The only challenge," he said, "is that we keep our foot rooted in our traditional brand while we are serving this bigger camp."

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