

Cable castings

Brandman steps down

After a year in office and having failed to boost the pay service's subscriber base with an infusion of mainstream programming, Michael Brandman has resigned as president of Playboy Programs, which produces and markets The Playboy Channel, Private Ticket, the company's pay-per-view service, as well as home video product. The company's official release (Brandman was unavailable for comment) said he wanted to get back into independent program production. But sources familiar with the situation said Brandman was frustrated at his inability to get higher corporate officials to boost his operating budget beyond the \$20-million range, which he believed was necessary to develop the programming that could boost subscriber levels. Sources added, however, that corporate management was equally frustrated that Brandman couldn't achieve what he wanted to accomplish within the allocated budget.

Brandman's resignation comes at a time when Playboy management is planning a test of a three-day Playboy Channel service that would air Friday through Sunday. The existing service is offered seven days a week, although indications are that most of the viewing takes place on the weekends. "Let's put it this way," said Edward Rissien, a long-time senior Playboy consultant who has succeeded Brandman as head of Playboy Programs. "There is a strong enough indication that [a weekend service] could be a viable one." If the weekend-only service tests well with affiliates and subscribers, the existing full-time channel could be scrapped. "That's being discussed now," said Rissien. But he stressed that the initial intention is to test a weekend service as a supplement to the current service. "We'd like to offer both," he said, to give affiliates and subscribers a choice. Playboy hopes to test the weekend service in several as yet undetermined markets by December or January.

Currently the Playboy Channel has a little more than 760,000 subscribers, down from the approximately 800,000 subscribers the channel had when founding president Paul Klein was fired in the spring of 1984. The

Playboy Channel's niche, he believed, was to offer "sex on demand," as he put it last week. Brandman's failure to broaden the channel's subscriber base with mainstream programming (such as film festivals and comedy specials) and his subsequent resignation, said Klein, proved that "obviously I was right."

That's not quite the case, according to Rissien. The channel is indeed scrapping most of Brandman's mainstream programming innovations, but Rissien insisted last week that the channel will not regress to Klein's "sex-on-demand" strategy. When the channel was launched three years ago, said Rissien, "it was much more sexually explicit. The emphasis was sexuality and nudity." And while there will be plenty of both as the channel makes a push to develop a greater amount of original programming, he said, "the focus will be, what's the best entertainment"—sophisticated, "adult" entertainment. Among the more prominent program forms the channel will rely on, he said, are comedy, variety, talk and magazine.

That will cost millions to produce and Rissien says he is currently working with the \$20-million-plus budget Brandman had. Whether that figure increases significantly "will be addressed soon," he said. "I'm hopeful of getting more."

Turner lands Explorer

The National Geographic Society's *Explorer*, which has been seen on Nickelodeon each Sunday evening since April will move to Turner Broadcasting System's superstation WTBS(TV) Atlanta early next year, it was announced last week.

Explorer, a video version of National Geographic magazine, will end its run on Nickelodeon on in January and debut on the superstation on Sunday, Feb. 2. The program is making the switch under a three-year agreement signed two weeks ago after nearly two months of negotiations.

In its new incarnation, *Explorer* will be an hour shorter, two hours instead of three. It will air each Sunday from 8:05 p.m. to 10:05 p.m. NYT, and will be repeated the follow-

ing day starting at 11:05 p.m. so that it can play in prime time for West Coast viewers.

At a press conference last Thursday at National Geographic's headquarters in Washington, National Geographic President Gilbert Grosvenor said finances forced the move to the superstation. On Nickelodeon, he indicated, *Explorer* was struggling as a business enterprise. National Geographic was responsible not only for programming, but for finding the advertising to support it, a job it knew little about, he said. National Geographic was faced with two options—absorb the losses or "bite the bullet and go off the air," he said.

Neither Grosvenor nor superstation President Robert Wussler, who stood in for the tardy Turner at the press conference, would provide details of their relationship. Wussler said Turner will pay National Geographic "several million dollars" in the first year of their agreement to produce the program and sell advertising for it as it would for any other program on the station. "We have a reasonable chance to break even with this program," said Turner, who appeared just as the press conference was about to break up.

In addition to the financial considerations, Grosvenor said National Geographic was also attracted to the superstation by its larger potential audience—it reaches 38 million homes, while Nickelodeon reaches only 25 million—and by its ability to aggressively promote the program.

MTV ad campaign

MTV has launched a new multimillion-dollar network, spot and cable television advertising campaign, as the "I want my MTV" theme is being replaced with "MTV: some people just don't get it." The network believes that most consumers are aware of MTV and what it's all about, said Tom Freston, senior vice president and general manager, affiliate sales and marketing, MTV. The new campaign, he said, "talks more to the sensibility and personality of MTV in a general way." The initial three-and-a-half week flight will be followed by another flight early next year.

SMATV revision

Showtime/The Movie Channel said it has revised its SMATV (satellite master antenna television system) licensing policy, effective Jan. 1, 1986, to reflect "the growing trend toward consolidation among SMATV operators" and to bring it into line with SMC's "overall business objectives of seeking incremental growth."

Jack Heim, SMC senior vice president, sales and affiliate marketing, said the changes include: Affiliates will be required to pay a minimum license fee of 500 subscribers, up from 200 (change applicable to new but not to existing affiliates); SMC will not serve a residential SMATV property that currently or within the previous 90 days has



Turner and Grosvenor