

10. APPROACHABLE

Programs should be presented, whenever aesthetically possible, in a manner that facilitates their integration into the life style of the ordinary viewer.

Sometimes programs on public television can involve a large commitment of time, either several hours in one night, or several consecutive nights in a week. However, in an age when many people are overworked, under-rested, and struggling to manage chaotic lives, even avid fans of public television can be wary of such a commitment. Rather than become involved with a program which they cannot commit to, some will forgo it entirely.

While it is important to maintain the flow of a program and not chop it into so many disconnected bits, it is also important that viewers not always be required to commit to a marathon viewing experience. Many otherwise enthusiastic participants in public television may have the ambition to start—but be too exhausted to finish!—the race.

Foundational Principle

The idea of trust is the very basis for all that public television does, and thus the first principle of a primetime program strategy. Like the foundation of a great public building, trust ultimately underlies and supports everything else that takes place on PTV, and anything that chips away at that foundation, has consequences throughout the rest of the structure.

1. TRUST

The programming respects the viewer and engenders trust with the “public” who are at the heart of Public Television.

Public television is perceived by viewers to be a sanctuary of non-commercialism and trustworthiness in a media marketplace dominated by monolithic corporations trying to find new ways to sell their products (including their programs). It is “Old Faithful,” as one viewer called it.

Many viewers complained about network or cable programming that failed to respect the viewer. This failure to respect (and the resulting lack of trust) has two distinct but related expressions. The first is a perception of pandering to advertisers, slanting the content of programming to benefit the financial interests of someone other than the viewer. One viewer, for example, complained about interviewers who routinely interview celebrities who seem to be there mainly to talk about their shows. (“And by the way, how’s your new movie going?”) The second is a pandering to viewers: for example, hyping programming that does not deliver on its promise, or exaggerating and sensationalizing just to grab viewers’ attention.

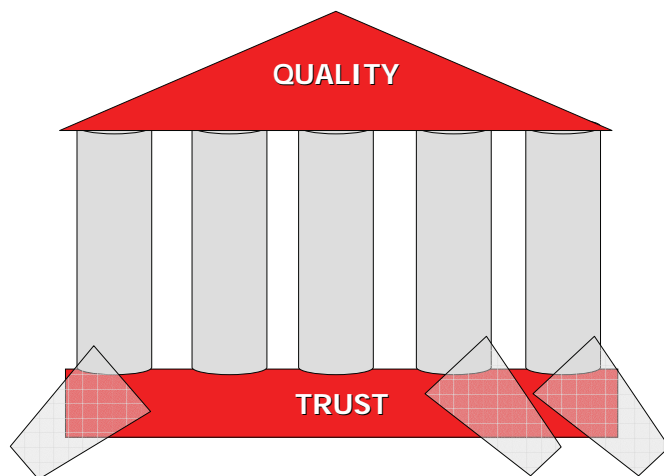
By contrast, public television—in its commitment to non-commercialism—signals respect for its audience and engenders their trust by avoiding even the appearance of pandering. By virtue of membership in public television, moreover, some viewers actually feel they are “owners” or “stockholders” in the station and that they “have a voice.” They trust that stations

have their interests at heart rather than the profits of a corporation.

This sort of trust not only provides a foundation for viewer loyalty, it also allows for viewer serendipity. While many viewers watch a program based on their initial interest in a topic, some viewers have so much trust in the programming of public television that he or she will watch a program, even if it's not the kind of show they'd normally watch, *just because* it is broadcast on public television. One delighted viewer had watched a recent documentary about the first transcontinental trip across the United States by automobile for just that reason.

In addition, viewers expressed a universal belief that public television can be trusted with their children. Not only do they count on public television for children's programming that is superior to what is found anywhere else on television, they trust that there is nothing on public television that they would be concerned or embarrassed if their children (or their mothers-in-law) saw it. Nor will the children in their lives be bombarded by commercial images while viewing.

Most have no plans to abandon commercial television, but they are unquestionably glad that the option of public television is there for them.



underappreciated—consider the native New Yorker who has never visited the State of Liberty or the Empire State Building.

9. VISIBLE

Without compromising its non-commercial format, programs are promoted in a strategic way so as to remind avid viewers of their favorites and attract more casual viewers for whom public television may not be top-of-mind.

Network and cable television have ample opportunities to inform their viewers of upcoming programs and—according to viewers—limitless resources to advertise elsewhere. The networks, it appears, do a good job of letting the viewer know what they're watching when they're watching it, or helping them to recognize a program more quickly when flipping from channel to channel. The opportunities for promoting programming on public television are presumed by these viewers to be far more limited. For many, public television just doesn't appear on their radar screen: "People just don't realize they're there." On numerous occasions, lighter viewers expressed the sentiment, "If I knew they had that, I'd probably watch it" or "I'm going to check that out!"

Among the ways viewers say they come to public television are the example or urging of trusted teachers, friends, and family members. Sometimes it is the natural process of maturation—with the attendant change in personal life style and interests—that has them beginning to watch public television in the evening rather than some of what they'd otherwise do. Some appealed to their own childhood experience or that of their children, though this sometimes worked against public television in that they were less apt to think of it in connection with their own adult needs and interests.

They also believe that if public television were to advertise itself in the other media venues they use more often—network television or cable channels, for example—they would be more conscious of what's available for them and check it out more frequently.

8. CONSISTENT

Programs are scheduled with as much consistency as possible, in such a manner as to make it easy for viewers to find what they like and to engender regular viewing habits.

While network television engenders viewer loyalty by maintaining a stable schedule of program from week-to-week, many viewers complain that they have a difficult time finding their favorite public television programs. “PBS kind of throws me off because they don’t always have the same thing on all the time.” “I have to stumble across it.” Like shoppers at a grocery store that alters the location of its merchandise on a weekly basis, these viewers either fail to find what they’re looking for, never develop a set of habits around public television, or else abandon “the store” altogether in favor of one that’s easier to navigate.

Some of the dislocation may result from pledge drives that substitute different programs for standard fare. Dislocation also occurs when the regular schedule is pre-empted by special multi-part, heavily promoted, and frequently repeated series deemed to be have special value or unusual fund-raising potential.

Whatever the reason, it is clear that such dislocation constitutes an added burden for the viewer—making it difficult to find favorite programs or creating disappointment or confusion when he or she looks for those programs and finds something else instead.

In addition, the practice whereby programs are frequently repeated—either on the same station or on another public station in the same viewing area—appears to have made many viewers complacent in their viewing of public television. Given the prospect of seemingly unlimited opportunities to view a program, they often postpone their watching for a more convenient time that never arrives. “One reason I didn’t make a point to watch it . . . There’s going to be another opportunity to watch it.” The value of a product is somewhat related to its scarcity: a product that seems abundant is sure to be

Overarching Principle

Every great public building has a peak, a pediment, a defining architectural feature. For public television, that feature is quality. Regardless of the genre, the subject matter, or the audience served, viewers believe that it is quality above all that distinguishes what they find on public television from what they encounter on most other program services.

2. QUALITY

The programming is written and produced according to the highest standards of quality, both in its content and aesthetic form.

Whereas much of what is found in other places on television allows viewers to “zone out” and “leave my brain off” on the one hand, or creates “overstimulation” on the other, public television is an oasis for “active minds.” Viewers across the regional, demographic, and psychographic spectrum, identified public television as “quality programming.” And, they perceive it as attaining a higher standard than network or cable stations. There was a sense that, whatever public television does, “it does right”—from costumes and sets, to production quality, writing, and overall sensibility. Metaphors for this quality include public television’s status as a “classic,” programs as “food for the mind,” or “grace, a gift we don’t deserve.”

This recognition of quality extends across diverse genres and formats. Even genres, such as “reality TV,” which are usually associated with the lowest standards of taste are viewed as enhanced by public television. For example, viewers appreciated the program *Pioneer Quest* and *Frontier House* as educational despite their reality TV origins, and some identified documentaries on such programs as *Frontline* and *Antiques Road Show* as “reality to me. The Real Reality TV,” in opposition to the scripted and staged “reality” that is often associated with the genre.

Given the quality of public broadcasting, however, it is not easily digested by the cursory viewer. It is the exact opposite of “background noise” that allows for “multi-tasking.” Viewers who are looking to “veg out” generally look elsewhere.

Supporting Principles

Five sturdy pillars uphold the great pediment of quality: intelligence, balance, uniqueness, engagement, and variety. These are attributes that viewers associate especially with public television programs. While one or another of these supporting principles may be more relevant to one genre than to another, none of them is optional or dispensable, and all of them work together.

3. INTELLIGENCE

The programming is intelligent, substantial, and challenging to viewers.

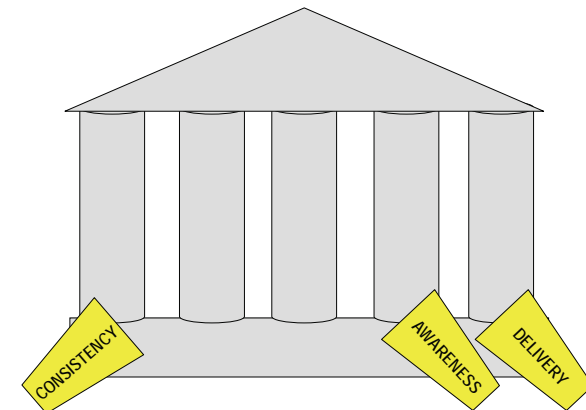
In the fog of the television world, where much of the content is “dumbed down” or is simply “fluff” or “brain candy” without even the pretense of intellectual merit, public television is a beacon of intelligent programming. Many viewers rate public television as smarter or more intellectual than either network or cable programming. Sometimes this difference is expressed in the language of grade levels. “Networks to me are really at a fifth grade level” or “[The History Channel] is elementary grade level as where I’m looking for something college level” or “When I think Discovery Channel, I think high school, when I think of NOVA, I think of college.”

Programming is more detailed and covers issues in more depth. It is more scholarly, based on more research. It is also more accurate. One viewer worried about the accuracy of some historical re-enactments on other stations: “what is made up and what is factual?”

Such high intellectual standards, of course, may be intimidating to some. Yet many viewers also found that the high-powered intellectual content was expressed in ways that were “comprehensible to the non-expert,” without ever condescending or “insulting my intelligence.”

Finally, the well-balanced person of many pursuits, will need to search a wide variety of such niche channels in order to create a well-balanced diet of television fare. Viewers of public television, themselves interested in a wide variety of topics and interest, appreciate the “anti-niche” character of public television. “We’ll miss the variety of PBS . . . there’s just such a range of different things.”

Illuminating Principles



If this great public monument to the human spirit is to be found, entered, and enjoyed—particularly at night during primetime—it needs to be illuminated. The accessibility of public television is facilitated when programming is produced and scheduled in a manner that is consistent, when it is positioned and promoted so as to be visible in a crowded landscape where viewers face increasing navigational challenges, and when it is approachable enough to be incorporated into viewers’ full and busy lives.

By the same token, public television's relatively limited inventory of drama and comedy (with their relatable characters and suspenseful plot lines), as well as its preference for sobriety and straightforwardness, leave it without some of the natural hooks and emotional ties that sometimes bind viewers to commercial television. The challenge will be to address this circumstance without chipping away at the all-important foundation of trust or undermining the pediment of quality on which viewers depend.

7. VARIETY

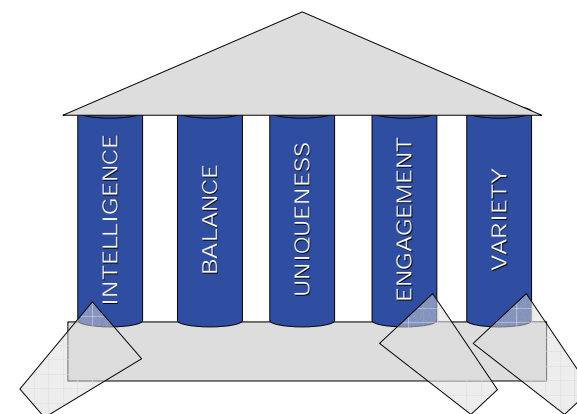
Programming is diverse and is not limited to a single genre, perspective or niche.

Many viewers of public television appear to have an unusually wide range of interests, and appreciate the range of material—from science and drama to history and current events—that their local PBS stations carry. Though those with cable or satellite reception make ample use of other channels—the History Channel, Discovery, HGTV—these do not appear to have replaced public television in the viewers' minds or hearts.

One supposed advantage to cable channels is their appeal to a niche market. If the only thing a channel must produce is programming about food or history or golf, then it should be possible to do this well and become a destination for all those interested in those pursuits.

However, while niche programming may create an identity for a cable channel, there is no guarantee it will produce an identity for any individual show airing on that channel. Programs on the same basic topic, with the same basic look and feel blend into one another—creating no program differentiation or imperative to watch, since pretty much the same thing can be found on that channel at any time of day.

Moreover, there is no guarantee of quality. Indeed, in an attempt to stock a cable service with many shows of a similar genre or subject matter, there is always the danger of being spread too thin. "Sometimes when I'm watching the History Channel, it's just a lot of pictures going by."



4. BALANCE

The programming is balanced and impartial, presenting factual information with a minimum of spin, bang, and glitz.

In a frenzied media market, viewers realize that news programming often uses glitz and confrontational circuses of talking heads, just to be heard above the fray. By contrast, news and public affairs programming on public television is seen as "not an argument, but a discussion." It is "conversational . . . not confrontational." It avoids the bangs and whistles, the smoke and mirrors, and just reports the facts.

As a consequence, public television is viewed as balanced and impartial by persons of all political persuasions, even those who view public radio as left-leaning. And when there is passion or excitement about a controversial issue, it is perceived by viewers as emanating from genuine knowledge and authentic conviction rather than a producers' desire to manufacture some kind of spectacle.

This reputation for balance and perspective is enhanced by public television's non-commercial status. Since the news is not beholden to advertisers eager for maximized ratings, the style and content are not sensational. Rather than run stories on "entertainmenty kinds of things . . . what is going on in Hollywood" or "Lacy Peterson or Kobi Bryant" or "Gay nuns

and drugs,” they stick to traditional news stories and treat them in more depth and detail. Rather than tooting their own horns, hyping their program, “patting their own asses,” they can just report the news.

5. UNIQUENESS

The programming is often unique, offering a different perspective, an unusual format, or a source for otherwise marginalized information or entertainment.

For all the ballyhooed diversity in broadcasting in the age of cable and satellite, viewers believe that there are still programs—and kinds of program—that could only find a home on public television.

First—at least in those markets that have it—is quality local programming. In an age of so-called diversity, much of television is still produced in the media centers on both coasts, often yielding a “cookie cutter” style and a homogenized, national content. Yet, some of the most popular programming on public television is locally produced and consumed, far from those media centers. Programs like *Tennessee Crossroads*, *Oregon Art Beat*, *Oregon Field Guide*, *Greater Boston*, and *Donnybrook* have their enthusiastic proponents who compare these programs to local news programs which focus more on anchor personalities and sensational crime stories—treating pressing local issues only in sound bites and exploring the local community in only the most superficial way.

Second, viewers identified some genres and specific programs as potential orphans without public television. Some viewers, for instance, perceive that period dramas such as those featured on *Masterpiece Theatre* have all but disappeared from commercial television. Almost all dramas (and this includes premium cable channels such as Bravo or HBO) have a contemporary setting—a definite lack for the television viewer who looks to be taken to places “I’d otherwise never have the chance to go” and to do things “I’d otherwise never the chance to do.”

Finally, viewers identify specific content or topics that would only be explored by public television. Whether reporting on the Nobel Prize winners or the political situation in Liberia—public television provides perspective on material often neglected by other news outlets, which are perceived to be more “Hollywood” or celebrity-oriented.

6. ENGAGEMENT

Programming entertains by engaging viewers’ interest rather than teasing them with “fluff.”

Much of television is designed to entertain, but the best programs do so by engaging the audience, with “good characters and a good story.” While many viewers pointed to network or cable television as well as public television programs (e.g., *CSI*, *Law and Order*, *Everybody Loves Raymond*) as a source of quality entertainment, the principles are essentially the same in either case. In order to engage an audience, the program must be “well-written.” A well-written program involves good dialogue, plots that are unpredictable, characters and settings that are realistic (or at least based in reality). Poor shows attempt to engage the audience with false suspense that fails to present an interesting denouement. These shows resort to hype or tawdry teasers (“tits and ass”).

Public television has at least two advantages in engaging viewers. First, many public television viewers dissolve the distinction between information (or education) and entertainment. For these viewers, the pursuit of knowledge is so engrossing, it becomes enjoyable—“learning, but not like school.” This is at the heart of the attraction many male viewers seem to feel with respect to *Frontline*.

Second, since public television is commercial-free it does not “break the flow of the show” and allows the viewer to engage in the plot or characters without interruption. Thus it prevents one source of viewer frustration (and potential flight), the commercial break: “I usually switch channels a lot in between commercials . . . but it didn’t have any commercials . . . so it kept my attention.”