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MEDIA

MTV reinvents its brand

■ **MTV, dropping 'Music Television' from its logo, joins a trend of broadened brands.**

BY SCOTT COLLINS

Los Angeles Times Service

Twenty-five years ago, MTV was best known for music videos starring Michael Jackson and Madonna. These days, its reigning queen is not a recording star at all but rather Nicole "Snooki" Polizzi, the rowdy party girl from the reality series *Jersey Shore*.

So maybe it's not surprising that last week the 29-year-old network bowed to the inevitable and finally scraped the legend "Music Television" off its corporate logo.

The change was a belated acknowledgment of what has been obvious for years: MTV has evolved into a reality channel that occasionally runs programs that have to do with music.

But the shift is significant because, in an era of rapid technological change and microscopic attention spans, how networks identify themselves matters more than ever, experts say.

MTV "realized being 'music tele-

vision' was too limiting," said Dave Howe, president of Syfy, home of such series as *Stargate Universe* and the now-defunct *Battlestar Galactica*. Howe says the right brand is essential "to cut through the noise and clutter of the media explosion" bedeviling the TV industry.

And he should know. Last summer, his network underwent a controversial name change, from the Sci-Fi Channel to Syfy, a made-up word that Twitter users said looked more like the name of a mop or a gossip magazine than that of a cable network. One newspaper called it the "dumbest rebranding ever."

But Howe says the name change has reenergized the network and sharpened its identity. Because it referred to a well-established genre, "sci-fi" could not be trademark-protected, an important consideration for a network looking to establish a distinctive identity. Also, he said, sci-fi evoked images of "space, aliens and the future," turning off some viewers and advertisers.

"We totally expected there to be a backlash from core sci-fi fans," Howe said. But the shift has "far exceeded our expectations. . . . It's

opened up the network to a broader range of viewers" and helped boost ratings.

For its part, MTV says viewers had moved beyond what the old logo said. "The people who watch it today, they don't refer to MTV as music television," MTV's head of marketing, Tina Exarhos, said last week.

Other networks have gone much further. In 2003, Viacom rebranded the New TNN, which itself rose from the ashes of the Nashville Network, as Spike TV. (It's now simply called Spike.) The Learning Channel was originally an outpost for educational fare; as TLC, it booted the explicit reference to self-improvement and achieved household recognition as the purveyor of the pop-culture smash *Jon & Kate Plus 8*.

Howe says the generic names — Music Television, Sci-Fi, Arts & Entertainment — date from the dawn of multi-channel television, when it was enough to tell viewers you were offering a certain type of programming. "It's too old-fashioned," he said. "You might as well be called Milk or Gas."