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MEDIA

Spanish-language TV winning on U.S. turf

BY JOSE CANCELA

jose@hispanicusa.net

We're coming up on the fourth anniversary of a historic event. December 26 marks the fourth full year that Spanish-language television ratings have been ranked side-by-side with ABC, NBC, CBS and FOX.

They used to be counted separately, with the English-language networks lumped together in one group and Spanish in another. I'll bet the English-language networks wish they still were. Because, after four years of counting them all by the same means and using the same meters, it's clear that the English-only broadcasters are in trouble, but Spanish is going strong.

It's not supposed to work this way — at least not for those who want you to believe that Spanish is on its way out. But, to borrow a phrase, the reports of Spanish's death have been greatly exaggerated.

The strength of the Spanish-language television ratings — especially among the young, coveted 18- to 34-year-old demographic — proves that Spanish is a powerful and growing force in this country, even though the majority of Latinos are now native-born Americans who grow up speaking English in school.

That's hard for the folks in the Lou Dobbs camp to swallow. In fact, a few months before the National Television Index began including the Spanish-language networks, no less than the esteemed New York Times weighed in with an article that contended that the changing Hispanic population in the United States meant Spanish was fading.

The March 9, 2006, article, by Mireya Navarro, was headlined Changing U.S. audience poses test for a giant of Spanish TV. The thrust of the report was that as more Hispanic children spoke English, fewer would speak the language of their ancestors.

As The Times article stated, 60 percent of the Latinos in this country are now U.S. born. That's a fact. But just because they grow up here, and are comfortable speaking English, doesn't mean that they're ready to abandon Spanish. If they were, it would be hard to explain the continuing growth of the Spanish-language television audience — including kids 2 and up.

Even back when the article was written, a study showed that while those U.S.-born Hispanics said they preferred English-language programming, "at least half" watched Spanish-language programs. Now that reality is even clearer.

Univision's numbers among 18- to 34-year-old adults regularly beat NBC, ABC and the CW. It comes in third or fourth for the week on a regular basis. And it frequently takes the top spot, bringing in the most viewers in any language, for whole nights. Just last month, Univision was the No. 1 network in the country among both 18- to 49-year-old and 18- to 34-year-old adults on the Friday night after Thanksgiving — regardless of language.

For the week, Univision ranked fifth most-watched in prime time, with more 12- to 17-year-olds watching it than the CW. Perhaps even more significant, the network ranked third among 2- to 11-year-old kids for the week — better than CBS, NBC and the CW. Those are kids, going to school here, watching Spanish-language television.

Was that a fluke? No.

During the quarter including the critically important May sweeps, Univision boasted an 11-percent increase in primetime viewership among total viewers, ages 2 and up, while the English-language broadcast networks reported, on average, a 4-percent drop.

Of course it's not just Univision that's bringing in the most attractive demographic for advertisers. When Telemundo recently posted its 2008-2009 results, it showed a 17-percent increase in 18- to 49-year-old viewers, and an even more dramatic 22-percent increase among 18- to 34-year-olds.

What's going on?

It's simple: content — content that Hispanics cannot find on English-language television. Content that allows Latinos here in the states to see themselves as they truly are, and not how they are stereotyped to be on almost a daily basis in the English-language media world. Content that speaks to us about our homelands and our superstars, our customs and our heritage. Content that speaks to us about our life experiences in the United States.

Most important, content that shows us what we can become; and all of it, en español.

Jose Cancela is Principal of Hispanic USA Inc, a Hispanic-market communications firm.

