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LEADERSHIP & BUSINESS PODCAST

EPISODE 76: CINDY DAVIS – THE CHANGING LANDSCAPE OF TELEVISION

Ken White

From the College of William & Mary in Williamsburg, Virginia. This is Leadership & Business. The weekly podcast that brings you the latest and best thinking from today's business leaders from across the world. We share the strategies, tactics, and information that can make you a more effective leader, communicator, and professional. I'm your host Ken White. Thanks for listening. Well, thanks to technology, globalization, and demographics, just about every business today is undergoing some level of transformation. One industry experiencing considerable change is television. Today viewers watch what they want when they want, how they want, and the choices of programming seem limitless. As a result, television networks and outlets are constantly on the lookout for new ways to connect with the audience. Cindy Davis works for Disney ABC Television as Executive Vice President Consumer Experience. She's responsible for understanding and engaging with the 150 million viewers that watch their shows every week across ABC, Freeform, and Disney channels. She visited William & Mary last weekend to attend the Women's Leadership Summit and Stock Pitch Competition. Between events, she sat down with us to talk about the changing landscape of television and how Disney ABC is working to create an experience where the company, the advertisers, and the viewers all win. Here's our conversation with Cindy Davis.

Ken White

Cindy, thank you very much for being with us today. It's a busy day here. First of all, tell us what you're doing here today. What's your role with the Women's Leadership Summit?

Cindy Davis

It's my first time and didn't I wasn't even aware of the Women's Leadership Summit and was invited to come get to know the young women that are here competing in the afternoon. We'll do panels with them to talk about ethics and values but also talk about things that could help them in their first job from a business perspective. I have a really interesting speed mentoring session set up in the afternoon that I'm really looking forward to. And I just have to say I reviewed the resume's of the women that I'm going to be meeting with. Wow. It made me a little. You know, sort of feel a little unworthy, honestly. There's some real rock stars here to speak with. So it is one of the things, Ken, that I'm

passionate about is the development of women in business in particular, and so I'm really excited to be here.

Ken White

Well, last year, of course, was the first year. It was a phenomenal weekend, so I know you're going to have a terrific day. Yeah, I just sort of hid in the corner. I know exactly how you feel. It's very impressive but so thank you very much for being here. So so, your job with ABC Disney what does it entail. What do you do?

Cindy Davis

Yep. So it's a newly created role. Right, it never existed before at Disney ABC Television. A year and a half ago, when I joined Venture Wood, who's the president of the division created a role called consumer experience. And it's really my job is to help the organization understand the hundred and fifty million viewers that watch our channels and our stations every week and to help engage them in our programming right at a higher level. So it's really simple that's across ABC News, ABC Entertainment, Disney channels, and Freeform, which is used to be ABC Family. It's our millennial channel.

Ken White

Right. Let's talk about Freeform. That change right when you got there, and some really good things have happened. What changes did you put in place?

Cindy Davis

Yeah, absolutely, and in fairness, the rebranding to Freeform happened before I joined the company. In fact, it was just happening when I joined the company. Really interesting opportunity for the channel to be able to expand beyond ABC Family and to bring in a whole new group of millennials who are interested in a different kind of television experience.

Ken White

Right.

Cindy Davis

I learned a lot about it. I have some really, really great people that work providing insights about millennials to the channel so that they can do a better job of developing the right kind of programming, right kind of scheduling, and really important for this millennial audience to be able to access content whenever and wherever they want.

Ken White

Yeah.

Cindy Davis

So linear television and the cable channel is one part, but all of the good work that we're doing to give them access to our content on Freeform digitally really important to this millennial audience.

Ken White

Yeah, what a change from the old days where most people we grew up with three channels if they were lucky and then cable and now all these various platforms, so you're talking about a number of different audiences, a number of different outlets, and a number of different platforms. How do you juggle all of that?

Cindy Davis

Yeah, you know it's a thing that brought me to the job is this explosion right and real transformation right that this industry is in, and it's the reason why I came because I believe my experience is consumer behavior, and I've spent my whole career understanding why people do what they do right. And bringing that sort of discipline to this industry in a time of change was just too exciting for me to pass up when you think about it. Right. It's a great time for television, and it's a great time for consumers of television. People who love television like you and I do right. What a great time. There's more content, long form, short form. You know there's more people creating great content than ever before. There's more devices by which to access that content. Right. On average, I think people have at least two and a half different devices they can watch TV on just in their home, plus all of the opportunity you have to explore content on the go right on your mobile phone on your iPad. And then, last but not least, there is this just crazy explosion of different kinds of content, from an original series on Netflix to a weekly series like Scandal, which I love on ABC, to short-form content on YouTube. So that opportunity to really explore and enjoy content it's never been greater.

Ken White

And I think of people who work in the business all the opportunities that have come up compared to a generation ago when there just weren't that many outlets, weren't that many production companies, and now you know they too have opportunities. So when that when, the content changes as it is what are you trying to do. What's what is the goal? There's, like, as you say, there's so much out there.

Cindy Davis

Its the goal is actually the same goal it's always been, which is to create fans for your content, right, to engage people in your content. It's just harder than it's ever been because there's so much competition for people's attention. Like you said, there's not three channels, right? There's an explosion of places where I can get my content, and people are really consumers have really decided that you know, I'm going to participate in

multiple different, you know, ways to get my content. You know most households both have a cable subscription or a satellite subscription and a subscription to Hulu or Amazon, or Netflix, right? I mean, sort of doubling the amount of content that they can get. They want access to a broad base of content that they can really enjoy. You know it's there's a lot of things that we have to do from a consumer standpoint just get the word out there about new shows that we have. That's never been harder. But the good news is right when it used to be that the only way you found out about a new television show was watching TV and seeing a promotion. Right.

Ken White

Yeah.

Cindy Davis

You know, those great trailers for those new shows. Now with all the social outlets and digital outlets that we have. We have many, many more places, in fact, that 18 to 34-year-old group that millennials they are more likely to get to find out about a new show via social media than they are watching a television promo today. So there's so many more ways to get the word out. Fragmentations the issue, right? So how do you break through? But back to the original comment. A great show with great acting and great relationships, and great characters will always bring people in.

Ken White

Yeah. How do you learn about your audience? What steps do you and your organization take to learn about them?

Cindy Davis

We have a variety of tools. Of course, we have syndicated tools like Nielsen, right, who tells us who's watching what when. The biggest challenge and our team is really leading it, is working with Nielsen and other companies is to really understand who's watching what when across all these new platforms and devices. Nielsen, as a company, does a really great job of understanding who's watching linear television right.

Ken White

Right, sure.

Cindy Davis

What shows are you and your household watching at 8:00 pm, right?

Ken White

Yes.

Cindy Davis

But that's not the way people are consuming media. Right. And so our team works to really from a variety of different sources bring together sort of in a bit of a mosaic. What are people watching when? Right, so we can see not just on our of our content but of other people's content. That's from a great example is understanding who's watching Grey's Anatomy, which is one of our, you know, just fabulous series that's been on the air for 13 years. It's just amazing. We have young women who are were too young to stay up and watch Grey's Anatomy when it started 13 years ago who are discovering Grey's Anatomy on Netflix for the very first time.

Ken White

Right.

Cindy Davis

Right. And catching up on the series. Catching up on the series and then sitting, you know, sitting on a Thursday night and watching it with their mom together on linear television. Right. So you have to really understand how you attract that viewership across all those different devices. So Nielsen's one way we do that, but we have to complement that with information that we can gather from viewers themselves. So a lot of primary research. Other people that bring us information and data about how people are viewing beyond linear television. Right. So that we work with and we work with a variety of different companies beyond Nielsen to be able to get that information. And then the real challenge is for our analytics team to bring that information together at an individual consumer level. That's the real challenge.

Ken White

Yeah. So the data are out there. It's a question of what does it actually mean to you and to the network.

Cindy Davis

Yeah, and to think and to be willing to think differently about it. Right. Our ultimate goal is to think about it at an individual household level. What does that individual household watching not just at 8:00 pm in the living room together and from their television, but what are the teenagers watching on their iPad in their own room right?

Ken White

Sure.

Cindy Davis

What is the four-year-old watching in the car on Mom's iPhone right for the Disney Channel, for example? And then you know what is dad watching when he gets together with his friends and is watching ESPN at a restaurant with his buddies.

Ken White

We'll continue our conversation with Cindy Davis of Disney ABC Television in just a minute. Our podcast is brought to you by the Center for Corporate Education at the College of William & Mary. If you're looking to improve your leadership and business skills, the Center for Corporate Education has a terrific program coming up soon. The certificate in business management. It's a five-day program, each day devoted to one topic, including strategy, accounting, operational effectiveness, communication, and leadership. It's a great opportunity for professionals who lack an MBA or simply want to improve their business and leadership skills. The program begins April 10th. For more information, go to wmleadership.com. Now back to our conversation with Cindy Davis of Disney ABC Television.

Ken White

Are we consuming as a nation a lot of TV more TV than we have in the past?

Cindy Davis

The last couple of years our team one of the things our team does is work with a variety of different sources to bring together a forecast of what we call total video consumption, all the things you watch, whether that's a short form video on YouTube or whether that is a traditional long-form video television series on your linear TV. For the most part, what we see is overall consumption of video is flattened out in the last two or three years, particularly for adults. When you think about it, the average adult watches about five and a half hours of video a day.

Ken White

Wow.

Cindy Davis

A day.

Ken White

Wow.

Cindy Davis

Yeah.

Ken White

I thought you were going to say a week.

Cindy Davis

No, a day. Now, remember that's checking the news on your iPhone while you're getting ready in the morning. That is a television show you watch at night. That might be

Ken White

Watching a TED Talk, watching YouTube.

Cindy Davis

could be watching a podcast, it could be listening, it could be watching a TED Talk, right, a video cast anything that you're watching across all those networks. The challenge is that are pockets of time to actually watch are pretty much tapped out right. I mean, you saw growth in pockets of time when you began to be able to watch, you know, a video on your cell phone, right, or you begin to be able to watch something on your iPad, but there's almost no more pockets of time. So we're pretty much tapped out. So for all of us, it's a battle for the share of viewing. Now, if the electric car really becomes a reality, it's one of the things our team has identified that there would be a new pocket of time that would open up. Right. There's lots of people who watch television or videos, you know, on the commuter train right into New York every day. Those of us who don't live in a large city. Right. That have to drive to work, right?

Ken White

Sure.

Cindy Davis

Even LA, you know it, requires a drive. But if somebody else is driving me, I might have an opportunity to sneak in a half-hour comedy.

Ken White

Yeah. Amazing. I was in an airport the other day. I watched an episode of Cheers. I was walking around just to kill some time.

Cindy Davis

The one place where we do a lot of work because we have Disney channels. We do a lot of work understanding how the viewing behavior of children 2 to 5-year-olds with Disney Junior and then up until eleven with Disney channels how that's changing, and there's a lot there's still growth there, and that makes total sense. Right. Because kids are still getting access to devices that they can watch more video on.

Ken White

Sure.

Cindy Davis

When they move from, you know, beg, borrowing, and stealing their mom's iPhone to having an iPhone of their own or a laptop of their own. Then they have more opportunity to watch television.

Ken White

So all of the platforms, the pockets of time, the changes in the audience. What does that do to linear TV, as you call it? What's the future? What do you see?

Cindy Davis

In the first place, linear television will always be, I won't say always but in the foreseeable future. As you and I are sitting here, doing this podcast will always be an important way that we distribute content and news right to a broad audience. You know advertisers desperately need opportunities for broad reach in this fragmented media industry we're in and broadcast television. Right. ABC and CBS and NBC, and Fox will fill that need. Our team was recently looking at a survey even among the heaviest streamers. The people that are watching the most Netflix, Hulu, Amazon streaming their content they still say that ABC is a must-have television network. Right. They still know there's a must-have broadcast network in their household. There will always be a need for great content for children. Right. As these millennials grow up and have kids right. They're going to want Disney Junior and Disney Channel and channels that they can really share with their children. But what's incumbent on us is to understand that linear television that can't be the only way we share that content, which is why we have our own app, right? We have the watch ABC app, and we share you know back episodes of our content. We're finding new and different ways to share that content beyond linear television.

Ken White

Does that have an effect on the type of programming that you're buying and producing?

Cindy Davis

Yes and no. Right. Like I said from the beginning, I mean, and it is a hallmark of the Walt Disney Company. Right. One thing we all know is that a great story with great characters will always engage. So there's a quality of storytelling that's important no matter what we do. But we're also looking at opportunities to be able to expand beyond that. I'll tell you an interesting story we launched a program this year around our Bachelor franchise. The Bachelor television franchise has been on the air now for 21 years.

Ken White

That's amazing.

Cindy Davis

Which is incredible, and one of the things we found was that people were looking for ways to engage with the bachelor franchise beyond the television show. And so we created a program with our friends at ESPN called Bachelor Fantasy League so that our viewers could not only watch the bachelor but have their own brackets and have their own groups. And so we created content right that went along with the Bachelor Franchise that we could share that would engage people more.

Ken White

That has to be fun. I mean, no one in TV did that even ten years ago.

Cindy Davis

You know, that is one of the things that I just wake up every day. You know, pretty blessed about is that what I do. And the product we make and the way people enjoy it is just fun. Entertainment is fun. I loved, as you know, I worked at Walmart before I joined the Walt Disney Company. Love the company, love the people, love the brands. It's such a great company. But at the end of the day, deciding whether we put one brand of laundry detergent or the other on the end cap versus what television series should we pick up for ABC for primetime, the primetime fall season. What I'm doing right now is a lot more fun.

Ken White

That's our conversation with Cindy Davis of Disney ABC Television, and that's our podcast for this week. Leadership & Business is brought to you by the Center for Corporate Education at the College of William & Mary's Raymond A. Mason School of Business. The Center for Corporate Education can help you get to the next level in your career with business and leadership development programs that specifically fit your needs. If you are interested in learning more about the opportunities at the Center for Corporate Education for you or your organization, check out our website at wmleadership.com. That's wmleadership.com. Thanks to our guests this week Cindy Davis and thanks to you for joining us. I'm Ken White. Until next time have a safe, happy, and productive week.