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Q&A

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Travel Channel chief talks M&A, Netflix, changes ahead for network

By Deborah Yao

Laureen Ong took the helm as president of [Scripps Networks Interactive Inc.'s Travel Channel](#) a little more than a year ago. She moved halfway across the world to do so, leaving [News Corp.'s STAR Group Ltd.](#) as COO in Hong Kong for the East Coast. But Ong, who also was the founding president of the [National Geographic Channel](#), has big plans up her sleeve for the cable network.

Coming off a quarter of strong revenue [growth](#) at the network, Ong's challenge is to keep the momentum going. Her strategy is to expand upon the traditional view of travel shows as voiceover videos of sandy beaches. Instead, Ong will use "trusted guides" such as celebrity chef Anthony Bourdain to help viewers navigate through exotic locales and Adam Richman to explore local joints with in "Man v. Food Nation."

SNL Kagan caught up with Ong to talk about the upfronts, her plans for the network and how she managed to get a World Series ring. What follows is an edited transcript of that conversation.



Laureen Ong
President, Travel Channel
Source: Travel Channel, Scripps

SNL Kagan: How did you do in the upfronts, and how is the scatter market looking for you?

Laureen Ong: We are up double digits. We have great momentum going into the third quarter.

That's all you can ask for. The landscape is really hard right now, when you look at how many new premieres are coming out. It used to be, summer was a time when cable networks can make hay. If you were smart and you knew how to launch a show in the summer, you could actually make some headway.

But the fact is there were 82 launches of programming this summer across cable and broadcast nets. ... Everyone's shouting at the top of their lungs for attention from the audience. So for me ... if I can just show continuous growth every year, that's a big win, because that is really hard to do.

What's your game plan?

Now that we are part of the [Scripps Networks Interactive] family, we want to be a pre-eminent lifestyle brand and category leader. ... We also want to be a destination for one of the most valued audiences in cable TV. You can go out there and chase big ratings, but it doesn't necessarily mean you're going to get a quality audience. We are fortunate with the profile of our audience — we're upscale, we skew a little bit more male at 52% and our median age is 39. We have a fabulous audience.

So now our challenge is, how do you get it larger? The audience we have right now is very loyal to us. They come back often, and they watch us a long time. The challenge is we have to get above the fray and bring more people into the network.

Can you talk more about your strategy of using "trusted guides" and celebrities?

When you look at some of the more traditional travel programming that is out there, it's more of a passive observation [with a voiceover telling viewers] "You should go here, you should try this." What the audience wants now is something a lot more compelling from personalities, whether it's taking you around the block or around the world. They want that told in the first person and they want to experience it with that person. They want that person to be familiar and credentialed enough so ... they're talking from their expertise. They are my friends in the know. I trust this guy.

Can you tell us about new stars you're interested in bringing on board?

I can't really point to some of the people that we're looking at because they're not yet on the schedule, so we can always catch up on those later. But a lot of how we're looking at the brand [revolves around], how do you build out on what already works

for us?

It's about redefining travel for the consumer. It's not just about an airplane ride, a passport and a two-week vacation. It's what you do in your free time, and how do we inspire you to do some of those things?

We find that people are far more interested in what happens here. They want a little bit of what happens out there, but they primarily care about what happens [near them]. Andrew [Zimmern's] highest rated show was when he went to Pennsylvania and he took you to a place that made scrapple.

What new shows are you most excited about, and can you talk about what's in development?

We've got a show coming out called "Truck Stop Missouri." That is a show that is being produced for us by the makers of [History's] "Pawn Stars." It is one of few independent truck stops out there. Joe, who is the proprietor, was living the good life in Australia with his wife. His father called him back and said, "You need to come home. I'm not feeling well, and I need you to run the family business." This is about his son coming back and running the business and all of the things that come with running a truck stop.

What plans do you have for [Oyster](#), the travel website?

We're absolutely excited about Oyster. The networks are places where you get inspiration [for travel and other ideas]. After you're inspired, then what do you do? Our hope is we can close that last mile.

There are a lot [competitors], particularly online ... but no one else is in 100 million homes the way we are with a network. That's our competitive advantage.

Does that mean you're looking at more acquisitions?

Once we announced [the Oyster deal], the great part is we didn't have to say anything else. People started calling us. That's because they knew we were serious. We've got a lot of people that are interested in partnering up with us on any number of things. It's not necessary to marry everybody that knocks on your door. Sometimes it's good to just be friends with them or just kind of hang out.

Can you talk about your affiliate fees? Half of your contracts are coming up next year.

We do have some renewals coming up next year. What I like about being part of the [Scripps Networks] family is we have a point of differentiation from everybody else. We are not a general entertainment network.

Scripps said that it is in [talks](#) with [Netflix Inc.](#) and [Hulu LLC](#). Does that include Travel Channel?

We believe that we should be available wherever the consumer is, but we also have a strong belief that everybody needs to pay a fair share for having that opportunity and for having that availability, as well.



Travel Channel's "Anthony Bourdain: No Reservations" in Istanbul
Source: Scripps Networks Interactive Inc.

What were some of the challenges you saw at the Travel Channel when you arrived, and what impact do you think you've made so far?

There were a lot of things [the previous team] did do well here. For the longest time, they had gotten their ratings through poker [shows], and it took a lot of courage for them to figure out we need to wean ourselves off of poker and we need to find another way to program this network. They went down the path of trying different things.

This year and next year is all about laying a very strong foundation and building strength across the week and across every night. Last year a lot of our ratings primarily came from one show, which was "Man v. Food." What we're trying to do this year is strengthen our nights so that it's not just one night that's driving all of our ratings. You go from one night and now we're going to stabilize three nights and three nights builds to four and five nights ... that's how you build up your ratings.

Is it true you actually own a stake in the White Sox? How do you like it?

I do! It's so small it's ridiculous. When I was working there, someone had given up their stake ... and broke it into little bits and they threw us a little bit. It truly is a little bit. So what do I get out of it? I can go to a game and probably call them in advance

and get a ticket or two. I can probably eat in the private dining room and I get an email blast from them, so I know how they're doing every season. Probably the most important thing I got out of them is they finally made it to the World Series and I have a World Series ring.

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