



The Religious Broadcasting Forum:

Production Versus Distribution
What's the Biggest Challenge for Christian Media?

By Christine Pryor

The situations aren't all that different:

Which came first? *The chicken or the egg?*

And what's the biggest problem with Christian television? *Quality of the programs? Or the way those programs are distributed?*

Just like the chicken and egg debate, it seems that quite often the Christian programming debate is one that rages on behind the scenes of Christian television stations, networks, and production facilities.

While it's a far bigger question that we can possibly answer here, we locked a representative from each side in the same room and asked them to "duke it out." (*In Christian love of course!*).

Pete Sumrall, is the President and Chief Operating Officer of the Lesea Broadcasting Network in South Bend, Indiana. Lesea owns and operates both a global radio network, as well as a seven station television network, supplemented by numerous cable affiliates. Raised in the family of an internationally famous evangelist, Pete became familiar with worldwide evangelism at an early age, and today, together with his brother Stephen, is expanding Lesea at a furious rate.

Phil Cooke is an award winning producer and director based in Santa Monica, California, Phil has a long established reputation as one of the most cutting edge producers in the Christian media community. Having taught and lectured at colleges,

universities, and conferences from Los Angeles to Moscow, Phil is well aware of the challenges facing Christian broadcasters as we enter a new millennium.

Religious Broadcasting: For decades, people on both sides of the camera have debated the way Christian programming is produced and distributed. From commercial sponsorship, to "book and tape" sales, to the nearly universal method of "paid time" broadcasting; producers, executives, and media leaders alike have been trying uncover new and more effective ways to finance media evangelism.

Pete Sumrall: The fact is, television is very expensive. When I look at the funding required to outfit our seven television stations with equipment, staff, and facilities, it's really staggering. But our mandate at Lesea is to reach the world, and today, the most efficient way to do that is through the media, so we have to find an answer.

Phil Cooke: ...and television audiences are far more sophisticated than ever, and to reach them, we constantly have to push the envelope with new programming concepts and ideas. The simple little "preaching" style program that used to be produced for very little money, is making less and less impact in a world where audiences demand a faster pace, higher quality, compelling storylines, and visual impact.

RB: So what do we do? How do we fund the future of Christian media?

PETE: That's a dilemma we at Lesea have been wrestling with for years. One of our approaches has been to use secular programs and commercials within our programming schedule. When we started the network many years ago, there was a feeling that "*you don't use commercials on Christian television...*"

PHIL: ...I always thought that thinking was a bit odd. Because the truth is, most Christian programs feature segments selling book and tapes. But we call them "offers" and not "commercials". (*A rose by any other name....?*)

PETE: Exactly. So we began using commercials in between programs, and it worked. Then, we started selling time to secular programs as well.

RB: But didn't you lose your identity to the viewers as a Christian station?

PETE: Not if those secular programs are strategically placed within the schedule to drive people to our Christian programming. For instance, we have a real desire to reach men...

PHIL: ...not a historically large part of the Christian audience....

PETE: You can say that again. That's why we started using sports programming to attract male audiences to the station. For instance in South Bend, we acquired the rights to broadcast the Notre Dame football and basketball games, which generated a huge audience. Then the key is to strategically place those shows around Christian programs so that huge audience is confronted with the gospel within the context of their viewing experience.

RB: Phil, from a producer's perspective, what do you think of that approach?

PHIL: There is no questioning the validity of being able to say a network or station broadcasts the gospel 24 hours per day. 24 hour Christian programming is a wonderful thing because you never know when people have needs or might tune in to see a ministry program. However, as a producer, I also believe very strongly that we can't continue "business as usual" in the Christian media world. If we don't get more innovative and compelling in our programming, this generation will go somewhere else. The challenge is that creative and original productions are expensive. For instance, most Christian stations would spend about \$5,000 tops to shoot a music video with a Christian artist.

PETE: Are you kidding? How about \$500?

PHIL: Ouch... Christian record labels will spend more - sometimes up to \$40,000. But I just finished shooting a secular music video for MCA-Universal Records, and spent nearly \$200,000 - and that's what our Christian programs are competing against. Realistically, I know we may never have the same budgets as Steven Spielberg, but if we're going to compete for viewers, we've got to up the ante, and that takes money.

RB: What about the people who say: *"We don't need big Hollywood productions - we just need to preach the simple gospel on television."*

PHIL: That sounds really great, but I couldn't disagree more. Sure, Hollywood wastes tons of money and their excesses are legendary. But one thing Hollywood does very well is deliver an audience, and that's exactly what we need to be doing. Remember - no matter how wonderful our message is, if we can't get people to watch long enough to hear that message, we've failed.

RB: So what's the problem, production or distribution?

PETE: Production, of course! You guys always want more money!

PHIL: Are you kidding? It's distribution! You people always want us to pay you to broadcast our programs!

PETE: Actually, it's a very difficult dilemma. In the secular world, networks like us, pay producers like Phil to create programs. But in the Christian media world, particularly without commercial sponsorship, we can barely raise enough money to pay for our infrastructure and operating expenses.

PHIL: So I spend my life looking for production funding. And that's not an exaggeration... I probably spend 80% of my time looking for clients and raising funding for projects and only 20% actually creating programs. It's a sad situation, but it's reality.

RB: So where do we go from here? What are the options?

PHIL: Because it's the very life-blood of what I feel is my calling, I spend a lot of time thinking about that. One of the things I do is carefully watch what others are trying. For instance, Jerry Rose at TLN has partnered with an outside producer who owns a large existing library of programming. Trinity Broadcasting has set aside a production fund to produce movies. Cornerstone in Pittsburgh is developing practical programming such as cooking shows to expand it's core audience. INSP uses direct response programming. And we've already mentioned Lesea's use of sports programming and commercials. I also know churches who are pursuing funding from foundations. We have a laboratory right in front of us and we're not working together enough to benefit from it.

PETE: And from my perspective, we need to partner networks and producers together to both spread the risk, and encourage innovative programming. We'll have a lot of bumps in the road and make a lot of mistakes, but the fact is, our Christian stations and networks have a direct line to the audience out there. So it's imperative that we seek out creative producers and work with them to develop innovative new programming for our audience.

PHIL: The bottom line is that the person who changes the way Christian programs are funded will change Christian broadcasting. Whether it's bringing Madison Avenue to the table for commercial sponsorship, tie-ins to product sales, internet convergence, foundation funding, or other ways, I really believe the era of "paid-time" broadcasting may be starting to fade. Let's face it - we have to do it, but no one really likes putting toll-free phone numbers on the screen and hawking books and tapes. In the Christian programs I produce, I try to be tasteful and creative as possible, but at the end

of the day, the question is *"Did we sell enough books or tapes to pay for the program?"*
But we do it to keep the voice of Christian broadcasting on the air.

PETE: Those are the difficult kinds of choices we make everyday - "packaging" the program while keeping the message intact - plus, finding the funding to make it all happen.

PHIL: The good thing is that organizations like the NRB are making forums like this available to discuss these issues. A few years ago, people would have been hesitant to talk about this, but I see a wave of young producers out there who really want to impact this generation with a message of hope. And they understand that to do it, our programs have to compete with the best the secular networks have to offer.

PETE: And we have to help provide the production tools to make those programs happen.

PHIL: Well, maybe you're not such a bad guy after all...

PETE: At least that's one thing we can agree on...

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