



MEDIA PROFILE: Extra shelves showbiz to make more room for 'human' tales

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If it happens in Hollywood, Extra is there. But the show's producers like to focus more on the human angle than just the glitz and glamour, reports Craig McGuire.

Syndicated entertainment show Extra is generally focused on all things Hollywood, but in the light of the September 11 tragedy, many of its entertainment stories have been shelved in favor of pieces about the experiences of everyday folks.

As senior executive producer Lisa Gregorisch-Dempsey told USA Today on September 17, "Our slogan on Extra is 'entertainment and more.' Now we're embracing the 'more.' We'll get back to entertainment, but we're just telling different stories."

A recent edition of the show, which runs on a variety of networks across the country, included a piece on how to talk to kids about the tragedy. However, Hollywood still sits at the core of the editorial coverage, as the same episode featured a piece about the studios' concerns over security and the America: A Tribute to Heroes telethon.

Extra is produced from Los Angeles with the help of a New York bureau, and had been planning to step up its coverage of entertainment news during its eighth season. The production company behind the show is Time Telepictures Television which, in addition to the daily half-hour show, makes an hour-long weekend edition. The total audience is around three million.

When Extra returns to its regular reportage, the half-hour weekday show, fronted by Leeza Gibbons, will adhere more closely to its normal five distinct segments: Showbiz Insider, Celebrity Justice, The Good Life (lifestyles), Body Beautiful (health and fitness), and Eye Candy.

If you're planning to pitch the show, you'd better get with the program. "Tailor your pitch to target one of the units, or peg it to a celebrity, and always try to offer us something our viewers won't see anywhere else," advises assignment manager Fatana Nawabi.

With producers typically planning longer segments than those of competitors, Nawabi expects publicists to come up with original pitches. "We want elements that make it an Extra story, such as unique angles," she says. "The segments tend to offer more than just entertainment, but also information that viewers can use and relate to."

Agency Formula PR employed the strategy of anticipating what Extra's producers would want before they actually wanted it to land several separate placements for client The Waismann Institute, a California heroin detoxification and treatment facility.

"When we heard Robert Downey, Jr. was busted for possession, we saw an opening," reflects Michael Olguin, Formula PR president. "When we know they're going to run the story," explains Olguin, "we tell the producers that we can make doctors and experts available, provide access to the treatment facility, and even invite them to follow a patient through the process."

Remember, though you may land the spot, that doesn't always mean your client is being best served. "Brand exposure is important, but the company is looking to get the phones ringing," says Olguin. "We instruct doctors and patients interviewed to always say 'the Beverly Hills-based institute' so when you're in Podunk, IA, you know where to find us."

In order to lure Extra to the opening of Disney's California Adventure theme park in Anaheim, CA earlier this year, Andrea Kaye, senior media specialist at Golin/Harris, used plenty of star power. Attendees included Jack Nicholson, Tim Allen, Roseanne, Whoopi Goldberg, the Beach Boys, and the GooGoo Dolls, among others.

"They're going to request a good place on the red carpet, so make sure you can deliver," she says. "Also, it's a visual medium, so they'll probably request b-roll. Try to have it ready before you make the call."

Kaye also advises publicists to be aware of the realities of producing a daily show. "Think like a journalist, and be conscious if they are on deadline, which usually takes up most of their mornings," says Kaye. "Be especially aware of new trends, because a show like Extra likes to identify and help set trends."

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