

Getting Networks to Respond

We can be heard if we think first and act with the right motives.

We've all experienced it—watching a television program that was crude, contained profanity, and was inappropriate for families, and we got upset or offended. When confronted with ever-increasing amounts of base or coarse programming on network television, many people respond with a letter to network executives.

Respected organizations such as the American Family Association and the Parents Television Council provide their supporters with templates of postcards or e-mails to send to networks, complaining about specific issues. The strategy is to orchestrate thousands of letters or e-mails, hoping to make a bigger impression.

But do network executives actually read our letters? Do they care what we think about TV programming?

I've always known that someone at the network is reading the letters, but I have great doubts about a group's ability to make an impact when TV executives receive thousands of the same preprinted postcard or e-mail supplied by ministries.

So I asked Dean Batali, writer and producer of That '70s Show. Here's what he had to say:

"Mass mailings and e-mails based on templates do almost nothing. I once had a network executive tell me they just roll their eyes and ignore them." (A "nuisance" is how they were described.)

So I asked him about letters written by individuals. How many of those does it take to make an impact? His answer was short: "One."

He said: "They take personal letters very seriously. The fact that a person took the time to craft a polite letter and then put it in an envelope and get a stamp—it speaks volumes more than a preprinted postcard or mass e-mail. Personally written e-mails do have some effect, but not as much as mailed letters."

He also mentioned that networks tend to discount audience response in certain regions of the country. A letter from the South objecting to certain things on TV is expected. But the same letter from New York or Seattle or San Diego makes them do a double take—it breaks their preconceived notions about who lives where and what their values are.

So I asked him how we could create a campaign that would make a difference.

"What would be most effective is for 10 or 12 people from all over the nation to actually send letters about the same issue or show at or around the same time, but not exactly on the same day," he said.

"This would present a nationwide concern. Also, the letters should go to the writers and the network presidents, as well as the people in standards and practices."

And he reminded me that anytime we write a letter or send an e-mail, it has to be polite and articulate. We should never, ever say anything such as, "I will never watch this show again," because then the producers will say, why bother

changing anything?

In many cases, when it comes to trying to change network TV, the Christian community has done more harm than good, and we've actually marginalized ourselves with our methods. But the truth is, we can make ourselves heard if we think first and act with the right motives.

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