

# Interview with Gail Berman Carsey-Wolf Center at UC Santa Barbara

15-18 minutes

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In May 2010, Gail Berman, Founding Partner of BermanBraun, sat down with MIP for an interview. In the excerpts below, Berman describes the way she and her team at BermanBraun use their experience in the television industry to produce engaging digital content.

As former President of Paramount Pictures and former President of Entertainment for FOX Broadcasting Company, Berman has held top posts at both a major film studio and television network. Her current venture is independent production company BermanBraun (founded with Lloyd Braun), which develops web properties in partnership with brands, such as celebrity-focused Wonderwall and lifestyle-oriented Glo, as well as television programming such as *Mercy* (2009--2010) and *The Cape* (2010).

## Creating Content for the Internet

Friday, May 21, 2010

**BERMAN:** We knew it was a challenge when we decided to

start our business in the middle of this [period of] confusion. We know that when we look back five years from now things will be much clearer. The business paths will become clear, but right now we are in a moment I like to compare to the “RCA television moment.” RCA was an engineering company. David Sarnoff was an engineer. RCA had created a medium but no one really knew what to do with it. They knew it was groundbreaking and extraordinary, but someone had to figure out what to do with it. The engineers had to hand off the technology to the program creators. We are in a similar place right now where we have extraordinary technology at our disposal, being created by engineers and technologists who are brilliant and extraordinary but have very little fundamental understanding of the audience.

We service an audience -- we provide them with content that enhances their experiences, enhances their lives, gives them enjoyment, a laugh, or something to think about. That is what I do for an audience. We also have a responsibility to our audience. We try to determine what the audience is interested in having us provide for them. We take the skills we learned over long careers in another medium, television, and use those skills in this medium to entertain an audience. A big part of our business is to try to grow this medium in the digital age.

Things are a little bit messy in the digital space -- you can make lots of mistakes and they can cost you a lot of money and no one knows the answers. You can try a variety of approaches and you will succeed or fail based on your material. When I came to California in 1991 and went to work in the television business there was a way you did things. You developed

material, you got somebody interested, and they bit. It was a fairly simple process; you were either in it or you weren't in it. It was quick and it was pretty defined. Nothing is like that now. That is disconcerting, to say the least.

**MIP: There are a couple of things implied in your description of the business. One is that, for a content producer like yourself, there was a point when you were dealing with a relatively small community of buyers. By contrast, now you have to be thinking about other kinds of clients. A second thing to think about is holding onto the idea of an audience as someone to be pleased, rather than using the term “user.” Both of those are rocky propositions at the moment. To return to that question about audiences, the idea of a user suggests interactivity. How do you hold onto the idea of the audience in an interactive age? What are the sorts of things you need to be able to do in order to do that? They are no longer the audience that lines up at primetime and chooses between three options. Also, does that affect the way that you conceive your projects?**

It absolutely affects it. There is no question that we are no longer in a three-network environment. The audience is increasingly moving away from sitting back on their couch, though many do and many would like to continue doing so. Those people are saying, “please do not bother me with all of these choices, just put something on. I like my sports shows, I like my comedies.” There are many, many millions of people that would rather not be disturbed by all of this, but as younger

people are entering consumer culture, that is changing. There is no question younger consumers are multi-taskers. They enjoy participating in the mediums they engage with. We have to think about these things as we pursue digital products. These factors are part of the experience.

The audience wants to be part of the experience. In television, it's a little less interactive. I don't think that the networks have developed a mindset that suggests they are engaging the audience. When Fox did *American Idol*, the reason the show was so groundbreaking was because the audience was the ultimate arbiter. Most of television is not like that. Look at the judging on *American Idol*. When Paula Abdul was not included in this year's *Idol* many people were suggesting Ellen (DeGeneres), the network's replacement for Abdul, would represent the audience's point of view – after all, she is not a singer or involved in the music business. I'm a big Ellen fan, but I understood, having been with *Idol* in the beginning, that the audience was already representing the audience's point of view. The professionals evaluated the talent and then the audience would give their vote. The audience didn't need someone to represent their point of view; they were already representing it. They were going to choose who won. I recognized that the way you inspired an audience to participate was to allow them to be able to make their own decisions after being presented with the performance and the evaluation of that performance. This makes them a partner of the show.

It is really important to think about the audience when you are getting into the digital space. What do they represent here?

What are they are looking for and how do they want to interact and participate? In creating *Wonderwall* we sat for a very long time in front of a whiteboard and talked a lot about these issues. No one was crying out for a new celebrity site, but we were proposing that if you could give the audience what they really liked in the celebrity space and do it better than everyone else you could succeed. The audience liked big photos, they liked to participate, they liked photo galleries, they liked ease of use, they like editorial bite, but it didn't have to be tawdry and it didn't have to represent the lowest common denominator. There was, it seemed to us, a space that we could fill based on what we knew about audience and what we knew about how they liked to interact with this kind of material.

That is how we built that site, thinking of all of those things and working with a great partner in Microsoft. The tremendous success of the site is our reward for having really spent the time to think about all these things. We asked ourselves, how do we create the best audience experience? How do we make the site easy to use? How do we give them a photo that appears immediately after being clicked, without buffering or anything else that annoys the audience to death? How do we make a site the best way we know how, using the technology available and making it scalable? How do we make it so that it can be used by millions of people and it can be updated five times a day? How do you do all of that?

We didn't come at it from a technological perspective; we came at it from an audience perspective. What does somebody want to see in a site like this? What is the consumer interested in

when they are entering the celebrity space? I know it sounds a little didactic, but that exercise was ultimately about making sure the design was not what drove us but that audience concepts drove the design.

**Do you think that your experience in television carries over as a way to imagine the Internet as a space somewhat like television? As a space where people spend time watching rather than a space where people spend time clicking around and going other places?**

Yes and no. If you look at the Internet as just TV then you are already lost. The consumer is not using it that way. Consumers are doing lots of other things when they are engaged in a site. They want to be moving around. The key is to work out how to create something they feel is easy to use, entertaining, and so involving that they want to hang around. It needs to be something that makes them feel they don't need to go elsewhere.

We try to take programming principles we really profoundly, fundamentally understand after many, many years of working in the TV industry and apply them here. That doesn't mean we are putting out three webisodes. What we are doing is building brands. You already see Wonderwall, now you are going to see the announcement of Wonderwall: Beltway, focused on the celebrity of politics, Wonderwall: Sports, the celebrity of sports, and Wonderwall: International. Wonderwall will represent a category of celebrity, so when you hear "Wonderwall" you will recognize it is a celebrity site. That is what we have set out to do.

## **Changes in Production Practices**

Friday, May 21 2010

**MIP: You just came back from the Upfronts. What is the future of network television?**

**BERMAN:** That is a big question. I went to my first Upfront in 1993 or 1994, and in 2000 I gave my first Upfront presentation. I did that from 2000-2005, and then I attended again this year and almost nothing had changed. That was staggering to me.

**Talk about that some more. Are broadcasters whistling past the graveyard?**

People are describing shows during Upfront presentations, and when the sales people get up, they say that the advertisers are not only going to buy the shows but they are going to get the web as well. They talk to the advertisers about packages and things, but aside from that, the presentation itself was the same as the first one I ever saw. For the first time I came away very disheartened by that. How is it possible that everyone is not on board for where everything is headed? I think that if you are an older executive you are just trying to wait it out, hoping to retire before this the whole thing collapses.

**We have heard that in other interviews, that people are just hanging on until they retire.**

We love the television part of the business; it is great. When we came together to start this company the TV people wondered what we were talking about. But we knew that the experiences Lloyd had had at Yahoo! and what he had learned while there

were very important. We had both been TV producers before, and we realized there are only so many times you can relive something before you have to bring something new to the party. Otherwise you are really a dinosaur, even in the TV business. It is really important that we try to establish a new business. That is what I took away from the Upfronts.

I was happy that our new show, *The Cape*, was picked up. We think it will have a huge digital life. In fact, the first call I made upon my return was to the digital people at NBC looking to get things started now when we have two months before Comic Con. That was something I would have never done in my old life.

**Given, as you've said, that digital production makes up two-thirds of your business, how much is NBC in charge of digital extensions and how much are you in charge on a project like *The Cape*?**

I can't let them be in charge, even though they are officially in charge. I can't let them because they don't know as much about this stuff as I do now, and certainly they don't know as much as the people working here. It is funny that we are talking about this because we just set the meeting yesterday. I called the television people for the meeting but I am bringing the digital people as well.

*Mercy* and *Accidentally on Purpose* were both shows that were cancelled after one year, which was sad for us because we liked them, especially *Mercy*. Under the old model in television, in the old days when people owned their own programs, when it came



time for sweeps, a lot of times producers like Aaron Spelling bought radio time in the marketplace for their shows. They did this marketing in addition to whatever the networks were doing because they were investing in their own properties. It was rather common because producers owned their own shows, though most people don't remember it.

We used a similar model for our shows. We called Microsoft up and asked if there was unsold time on *Wonderwall* and could we do a buy, without money, for our shows? We used the scroll bar to promote *Mercy* on a big episode, or for a finale or sweeps, or for the launch of *Is She Really Going Out with Him?* We put that value proposition together and showed the network what being partners with us also provides for them. We showed them the dollar amounts of value behind those buys. They weren't actual buys, because we didn't have to put actual cash up, but it is the contemporary version of what producers like Aaron Spelling used to do. I think it is funny to liken it to radio because most people don't remember that people bought ads on radio at all.

**That is fascinating. I am teaching TV history right now and I always try to show my students that things circulate and come back around.**

That is the thing. We are investing in our own shows. For those other shows it was a different time because of Fin-Syn. Fin-Syn ended 1993. I come to Los Angeles in 1991, so I came in on the tail end of this kind of promotion. I don't think Spelling's company had been sold to Viacom yet. I find it funny because here we are using our resources in a different way for the same effect.

**When you are pitching shows to the networks and conceiving shows for cable how do you think your shows are different or distinctive compared to what some of those executives who are hanging on are proposing?**

We are hanging on too.

**Right, but they are hanging onto an old model and you are trying to conceive of a new model. What are you thinking about that is different from what you were thinking about when you were developing programs at Regency or at Fox?**

I am not sure I am thinking completely differently. I would like to think I am still thinking in a way that hits on some core emotional level that says something about the world we are living in. I definitely don't think it is an entirely different thing.

Producing *The Cape* we know instinctively it will live very well in the digital space. I can't think of another company that can possibly handle those two spaces the way we can. Remember both Lloyd and I are from really different mediums. It is not a case that we propose to go with a television show because we think that it will fit well on the web. It is much different.

There are components of *The Cape* that could live very well online. We come up with millions of ideas for digital because the audience for the show is living in this space. It is going to be a "now" audience, a family audience, a young audience. Our interest in digital doesn't dissuade us from working in television, because NBC pays us to work in television but we look for opportunities to expand beyond that. We are thinking a lot about what we might bring to Xbox and what we might bring to our

other partners. We are not just saying, “let’s do webisodes.” There is a fundamental lack of understanding about what is different between these mediums; they are not the same.

[Read the complete transcript of our conversation with Gail Berman in \*Distribution Revolution: Conversations about the Digital Future of Film and Television\*.](#)