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Sharing stories ñ the new television season

by Joe Ferullo

NCR Today

The new television season began in earnest last week, and all around Hollywood so many executive fingers were crossed, it was hard to pound out even the simplest message on a Blackberry. The previous television season ? marred by a months-long writers strike ? was an unmitigated disaster, perhaps hastening the demise of television as a mass medium.

Would this season be different? Would the major broadcast networks lure viewers back into the fold? Would tough economic times bring people together around the electronic hearth to share stories once again?

So far, the signals look encouraging, and the new economic reality may indeed lurk behind it all. Traditional programming has bloomed early: on CBS, crime dramas new and old significantly widened audiences over last year. ?NCIS,? a seven-year old police procedural, drew in a record 20 million viewers for its season debut last Tuesday. At ABC, two new comedies ? ?Modern Family? and ?Cougar Town? ? also debuted to unusually strong numbers.

Comedies and cops are television staples, and it may be that viewers are looking for familiar formulas that also give a nod to current realities: ?Modern Family? examines three households of distinctly contemporary stripes; the main character on CBS? ?The Good Wife? (which also premiered to strong ratings) features a woman who goes returns to a law career after her politician-husband was forced to publicly confess his marital infidelities.

The tone of many of these shows is solid, dependable and kind-hearted. The good guys win, the bad guys get their due -- and millions of people tune-in.

Historian Morris Dickstein addresses the same themes in his new book about culture during the Great Depression, titled "Dancing in the Dark."

Dickstein explores how film, dance, and popular music helped audiences escape their troubles while at the same time openly acknowledging those problems. At a time when "regular folks" suffered and the fat cats seemed to keep feasting, pop culture spoke to the triumphs and dignities of everyday people.

The "boom years" of the last two decades were marked by increasing fractures in popular culture. Aided by technology like iPods and TiVos, everyone was encouraged to go his own way and seek out narrow entertainments that spoke to him alone. It was, in some ways, an ethos that fueled consumption: to be the master of your own pop culture destiny, you needed all these new-fangled gizmos that delivered you endless choices.

People whose job it is to mull over these things worried that something communal was being lost "the songs and shows that defined us in decades past as a society. Years from now, as people thought back on the 00's, would they remember shared moments, or individual selections savored on digital devices?"

These agents of fracture remain, of course: 200 channels of satellite radio, 500 choices on the cable box, literally uncountable numbers of websites and blogs. But there are some incipient signals that, as the rush for the newest new thing loses its luster, the search for common experience has rejoined the fray.

And, of course, "American Idol" doesn't even debut until January.

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