

'Family values' entertainment needs to also tell great stories

Sr. Rose Pacatte | Jul. 27, 2013

There has been some interesting activity regarding faith-based entertainment this summer, including a summit between Hollywood and faith-based production companies, [an analysis by the Vatican's newspaper](#) [1] of comic book superheroes, and [the June 22 announcement](#) [2] by former U.S. senator and one-time GOP presidential candidate Rick Santorum that he is now the CEO of EchoLight Studios, a Dallas company that will produce faith-based and family productions across all platforms.

I was present at the well-attended second, perhaps annual, [PURPOSE: Family Entertainment + Faith Based Summit](#) [3], put on June 21 by the entertainment magazine *Variety* in association with the international public relations firm Rogers & Cowan. The firm is placing itself solidly in the family entertainment and faith-based content producer genre, as it were, and wants to bring this kind of content "to consumers on every screen."

Throughout the day at the Four Seasons Hotel in Beverly Hills, the panels and presentations focused on family and faith content, the need for the stories to be commercial and to respond to what parents want for their kids in this growing market.

The day started off with a keynote conversation with Steven Quinn, chief marketing officer for Wal-Mart, and representatives from Procter & Gamble and the Hallmark Channel, who spoke about their new partnership to create television movies for [Walden Family Theater](#) [4].

These corporations want to be the brands of family entertainment because, as Quinn noted, "brands built around family consumption is what advertisers depend on."

Wal-Mart serves 85 percent of Americans over the course of a year, and is dependent on content to get across its commercial messages, Quinn said. How the Wal-Mart brand is perceived depends on those who create that content.

"Wal-Mart will align itself behind what their families want," Quinn continued. Wal-Mart has the budget for such content, he said, but so far it's just not there. He also said the content must be able to compete with what's out there from a quality standpoint.

Wal-Mart was a partner with the Emmy-nominated History channel miniseries "The Bible," which NBC has just picked up along with a sequel. A two-hour abridged version of "The Bible" has just been announced as well. Executive producers Mark Burnett and Roma Downey captured everyone's attention when they spoke about their experience, including the many challenges, in producing "The Bible." The series had the highest ratings of its time slot in March as well as the highest ratings ever for the History channel.

Family programming was defined as shows that parents can watch without their kids and that kids can watch without their parents. No one mentioned age limits or singled out any program that exists today that fits the criteria. Also, just because parents and kids can watch something because of the wholesome content doesn't mean that they will watch.

But what are family values today for television? One panelist said that means programming that is anchored in respect, honor, loyalty and doing things as a family, being a family and having a spiritual base.

Randy Testa, vice president for education at Walden Media, spoke about an upcoming film he has produced for the Walden Family Theater, "The Watsons Go to Birmingham," based on the 1995 novel by Christopher Paul Curtis. It tells the story of an African-American family that ends up in Birmingham, Ala., in 1963 during the civil rights era. Testa said the film, in which "a family's history collides with real history," will be a game-changer in what family values on television means because it is about helping one's neighbor, caring about the poor, the hungry, the homeless and the marginalized.

There was no consensus on what makes an entertaining faith-based program or movie that would appeal to a large audience. For instance, Ben Howard, co-founder of Provident Films, said his company is not looking to do anything other than to produce explicit faith-based entertainment. But Jim Huggins, CEO of New Shepherd Films, said that the faith content in his company's films is more subtle to appeal to a larger audience.

At the end of the day, the bottom line for this conference was that the entertainment industry needs great products for family and faith-based programming to be successful and there simply is not enough product yet available. There is a market for it because parents have spoken, and they don't want edgy or violence. It goes without saying that sex and inappropriate language are unacceptable as well. And these programs and films have to appeal to the "four quadrants" of the audience: male, female and over and under the age of 25.

I don't know about you, but I think it sounds almost impossible to produce something for the family that is entertaining and faith-based that will also be of high quality. It takes a substantial budget to produce programs that kids of all ages will sit down and watch with Mom and Dad. Mom might buy the DVD at Wal-Mart, but it doesn't mean anyone at home will really watch it.

Voices that reinforced the need for great stories and stellar writing were raised at the summit, but not very loudly. A couple of people even mentioned "art." According to Santorum's announcement about his new role, the keys to success of faith-based and family entertainment are "great content and economic success." I disagree.

I believe there needs to be a new definition for "four quadrant" programming: great stories, stellar writing, excellent production values and skilled acting that a variety of ages will want to watch or experience. It has to be good art. Good art is good theology and good theology is good art. Finally, until programming and films respect the intelligence of the audience to make their own meaning, they will only be the equivalent of sermons in a can.

To be successful in every way, family and faith-based productions will need to be inclusive of the families in the United States, beginning with the ethnic and religious diversity of the audience. Faith-based must mean more than generic Protestant Christian. Family films must break the bland bar and refuse to be judged "good" because they do not have offensive content. If I hear one more person from family or faith-based production companies say to me sotto voce, assuming I agree, that the Jews or the gays run Hollywood, I will no longer be silent. Money runs Hollywood, and any other notion reflects racism and bias.

If family and faith-based films and programming are to succeed and make a difference in the culture, they must shed light on the joys and pains of all humans by telling compelling stories in compelling ways.

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[2] <http://echolight.com/news/rick-santorum-is-new-ceo-of-echolight-studios/>

[3] <http://variety.com/conference/purpose2013>

[4] <http://www.walden.com/walden-family-theater>