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Advertising

'Law & Order' Boss Dick Wolf Ponders The Future of TV Ads (Doink, Doink)

By **Brian Steinberg**

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LONG BEFORE he created the popular crime-solving TV series "Law & Order," Dick Wolf was an ad man working for Benton & Bowles and other agencies. One of his big accomplishments was helping to devise the slogan "You can't beat Crest for fighting cavities" for the Procter & Gamble toothpaste. When working with P&G, Mr. Wolf says, "the sacred mantra was brand extension, and the biggest negative was a brand extension which would hurt the brand. That was to be avoided like the plague."

He took P&G's lesson to heart when building "Law & Order" and its critically-acclaimed spinoffs, which are broadcast so frequently on NBC and cable stations that their familiar "doink, doink" sound effects between scenes seem ubiquitous. Mr. Wolf gives P&G full credit. "There are some tips you never forget," he says.

These days, however, even the most successful TV producers face an uncertain new world. Consumers can watch entertainment programming whenever they please, on venues other than traditional television, and speed through the commercials. Mr. Wolf, 59, recently spoke with The Wall Street Journal about the changing relationship between advertisers and television. Excerpts:

The Wall Street Journal: We see producers trying to come up with ideas that will play well on mobile phones or the Web. Are these ventures worthwhile?

Mr. Wolf: I'm feeling that maybe I'm totally out of touch. I've been pitched Webisodes. I've been pitched everything. . . . C'mon. Please, you think ringtones are going to be a major revenue stream for studios or networks? . . . Unfortunately, the business model is irreparably broken, and people are going to have to figure out something new. . . . I'm 59 years old. I don't think the world is going to come crashing down in five to six years, but I guarantee you, if anyone tells you what the television business is going to look like a decade out, they are on drugs.

WSJ: The CW recently unveiled two-minute-long themed ad breaks known as "Content Wraps." They're meant to be as entertaining as the programs they interrupt. As a producer, how would you feel if an advertiser ran something they hoped was as compelling as one of your programs during one of your programs?

Mr. Wolf: I'd love nothing better than to have people be watching interstitial moments in the show, so they didn't go channel surfing. In reality, I think it's an absolute pipe dream. Look, the bottom line is Americans don't like commercials. . . . I don't think anybody wants to watch two-minute spots, but the wonderful thing about show business, television and advertising is nobody knows nothing. . . . When I got into the advertising business, they still sold 60 [second commercials]. Then it went to 30s. . . . The idea that people in their chairs want to watch something six times as long as that, I don't buy it.

WSJ: Decades ago, many programs were sponsored by a single advertiser, who often got to showcase their products during the show itself. Would you want to work with an advertiser in the early stages of coming up with scripts?

Mr. Wolf: In the old days, that was one of the only ways shows were done. Basically, networks were leasing systems. They leased their air to the advertisers. Kraft would come in and say, 'We want Saturday at 10 this week, and we'll pay for it,' and it was Kraft's television. This is very, very old wine in new bottles.

I've had the talks for the last decade with most of the major advertisers in terms of trying to get advertiser-supported television. . . . If there is a way to integrate [an advertiser] positively and seamlessly, I would have absolutely no objection to anybody who is willing to shoulder some of the cost of a program in a significant way. I'd be more than delighted to talk to them. It's very hard to do it correctly, and it's one of those things where there is a tipping point [of advertiser exposure in the program], and as soon as you hit

the tipping point, the audience goes away.

WSJ: Your programs are known for hewing to pretty basic storylines -- a crime is committed, the cops solve it and the legal system tries the perpetrator. So do the 'CSI' series. Would you consider adding more elements of the detectives' personal lives to the L&O series, for example, if advertisers demanded it?

Mr. Wolf: There is a method to ['CSI' executive producer] Jerry Bruckheimer's and my madness, and it's an interest in stand-alone episodes and very little serializing, and very few personal things that are continued over multiple episodes. You can't expect people to make appointment television for off-network viewing five days a week if you script a show and you have to go to people who miss Tuesday and Thursday. It's going to be a continuing problem going forward and the bottom line is the audience is continuing to erode every day. . . . I've never heard of advertisers demanding creative changes. They just want ratings.

WSJ: What do you think of 'CSI,' which has sort of grown up into a rival to the Law & Order empire?

Mr. Wolf: 'CSI' is a franchise. It is like the Palm restaurant. You can go to Chicago, New York, or Los Angeles. You want a great steak? You go to the Palm. . . . That's what 'CSI' is. It's a great hour of television set in New York, Miami or Las Vegas. 'Law & Order,' I've developed it as a brand. It is more like a Mercedes. There are a lot of models, but you'll get a good car. If you go back to my advertising days, it's more like Crest. When I started on Crest, it was essentially one flavor. Then they brought out mint. Now they have a gel. They've got different flavors. They've got every permutation of various kinds of toothpaste delivery systems that have been invented. What that means is they are different, but if you want toothpaste, you grab Crest.

WSJ: What's the outlook for the rerun value of programs like yours, given DVDs and other new technologies?

Mr. Wolf: DVDs are already a mature business. The serialized dramas do better on DVD than procedurals [shows where the procedure, or police work, is more important than the characters], which are more commonly available in reruns. . . . Notwithstanding, the economic model is getting further fractured and the real place where the rubber is going to meet the road is downloads. I don't know if USA or TNT is going to pay top dollar for shows that have been downloaded for six months, nine months, before the DVDs even come out, which means the hard-core fans of the show have probably got a permanent copy on their hard drives.

WSJ: 'Law & Order' has been on the air for almost 17 years, while the spinoffs are a little younger. How long can they last?

Mr. Wolf: They should last as long as the ratings stay at the level they have been. . . . At a certain point, the numbers will not support the expense of making the shows, and at that point, they will be canceled. . . . I have often stated my goal, which is to beat 'Gunsmoke,' and to become the longest-running scripted hour in history. ['Gunsmoke' aired for 20 years]. That would be great.

WSJ: With the three shows on NBC and cable channels USA and TNT and sometimes elsewhere, isn't there a concern about oversaturation?

Mr. Wolf: The best way to answer the question is USA. If there was a problem about that, I don't think it would be [a significant part] of their prime-time schedule. . . . Nothing would make me happier than total ubiquity, [if people could] at some point get one of the branded episodes 24 hours a day, seven days a week. It would be fine with me.

WSJ: You tried to launch a fourth L&O series and another legal drama, 'Conviction.' Can you take this thing any further? What other ideas would you try?

Mr. Wolf: We've got eight projects in development for next fall. Two of them are comedies. I would love to be in the comedy business. I would love to be in a situation to get another drama that could run 17 years. It's not very likely, but hope springs eternal. . . . Is there going to be another legal drama? Sure. Most of the ones that have been put on in the past 21/2 years haven't worked, but one of the reasons is that are some pretty good ones still on. You have to beat that benchmark. I'm not sniping at other shows, but if you are going to do a show about a prosecutor, such as 'Shark,' you'd better do better stories than we are doing on 'Law & Order.' If you are going to do a forensic show, you'd better do it better than 'CSI.'

WSJ: Do you think that if you were entering the business today that you'd be able to have as much success as you've had?

Mr. Wolf: No. The business has changed so massively. . . . You will never have the market forces again that, how do I put this, that allow people to get rich. . . . The reality is you will never have the licensing fees

negotiated again that resulted in 'ER' getting [millions of dollars] an episode, and that's where a lot of people made what many would probably insist is an unconscionable amount of money. . . . The upside home runs for shows have been sort of flattened out by the new economic models of how shows are produced.

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