Danny DeVito in It's Always Sunny In Philadelphia

PATRICK MCELHENNEY / FX

When FX got into the comedy business, the plan was to produce series on a budget. Then it hit paydirt with *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia* — a show created by three actors who made a pilot for $100, the cost of camcorder tapes and pizza. Budgets aren't quite that low at the network, but FX has set the bar for cost-effective production, and other networks are following suit.

sunny, funny & frugal

BY **GRAHAM FLASHNER**

Defining television's Golden Age is a matter of perspective. If you're a viewer, you could make a compelling case for it being right now, thanks to the proliferation of high-quality shows on basic and pay cable. But if you're a television professional, the Golden Age was that far-away time, pre-reality TV and pre-cable, when the broadcast networks were dominant, when a 30 share was as common as laugh tracks and summer reruns — when it was virtually impossible to lose money producing television.

These days, the broadcast networks are often loss leaders for parent corporations. And while they can still command 25 million viewers for a mega-hit, their cable brethren, operating with lower budgets and with a much smaller slice of audience, have less of a margin for error when it comes to developing series.

"One of the keys, from a programming standpoint, is not trying to be all things to all people," says Jeff Wachtel, president of original programming at USA Network. "It's about being

Louie's Louis C.K.

incredibly special to a significant enough number of viewers. The less expensive you can make it, the lower the threshold of audience you need to sustain."

It was inevitable that cable would turn to a more cost-effective business model to produce shows. As president and general manager of the FX cable network, John Landgraf has spearheaded a wave of low-cost comedies — *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia*, *Archer*, *Louie* and *The League* — that have revolutionized the way series get made.

"The way the business is structured, you cross-collateralize big hits that pull the train against very expensive failures," Landgraf says. "On basic cable, our big hit can't pull the kind of train *The Simpsons* or *Two and a Half Men* can pull."

Landgraf previously headed Danny DeVito's Jersey Films, where he learned some valuable lessons as an executive producer on *Reno 911*, Comedy Central's low-budget *Cops*-style spoof. When he came to FX, the network already had an established brand in boundary-pushing drama, with edgy shows like *The Shield*, *Nip/Tuck* and *Rescue Me*. But it had yet to establish a comedy identity, and Landgraf saw a golden opportunity to counteract the rising costs of traditional network sitcoms, where license fees soar well north of $1.5 million per episode.

"In drama, there are things that cost time and money," Landgraf notes. "You're trying to portray a world, or maybe a period in time, where you have to get costumes or settings right. People don't seem to care as much how a comedy looks. They want it to be credible — it can't be amateurish or cheesy — but more important, it just has to be funny.

"When I saw how much we were spending to license shows from studios, I wanted to start our own studio," he continues. "I was interested in the notion of independent comedy. But it couldn't exist without scaled-down budgets."

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ERIC LEIBOWITZ / FX

For Landgraf, the future arrived in the form of an unheralded twenty-six–minute comedy pilot, written and produced by a trio of unknown actors for roughly $100, which covered the cost of camcorder tapes and pizza. It became the basis for *Sunny*, an unconventional slacker comedy that revels in political incorrectness.

Centered on a group of friends (played by the show's creator, Rob McElhenney and two real-life pals, Charlie Day and Glenn Howerton) who own a dingy Irish pub in South Philadelphia, the series, now entering its sixth season, has evolved from a cult favorite to a genuine hit. More significantly, it's become the low-cost, high-quality template that other cable networks are starting to emulate.

Sunny was the first show shot under the guise of FX Productions, an in-house arm of FX Networks. Landgraf gave McElhenney $400,000 to re-shoot the pilot with a professional crew. If it worked, FX would have a pilot for one-quarter the cost of a network comedy. Still, the executive wondered if he'd made the right decision.

"I really didn't know if they could pull it off," he recalls. "They had never written or produced a thing. But I thought they had extraordinary talent. Part of what we were looking for was how to create a system to foster independent voices who don't know how to produce twenty-two to twenty-five shows a year but are willing to make it up with us as it goes along."

If the *Sunny* team felt the pressure, they didn't show it. "I wasn't concerned," says McElhenney. "Maybe it was just the hubris of youth, but we never had any doubt we could do it. Our mantra from day one was, we're not making *24*. We're making a show about people sitting in a bar talking. Character was going to drive the story."

"We were trying to put something different out there from what young people viewed as a sitcom," Landgraf says.

The pilot and the six episodes that followed were shot in stripped-down, guerilla fashion on a set located in a former Los Angeles newspaper production plant (it would take a few years before the show was successful enough to afford a soundstage). Scenes were shot out of order. Conditions were spartan. Cast members shared the same cramped trailer.

They shot eleven to thirteen pages of script a day — unprecedented, given that most single-camera comedies are shot in five days. *Sunny* knocked its off in three and a half.

"From an actor's standpoint, it's a lot more fun to be in front of the camera running dialogue as opposed to sitting in a trailer waiting for a

lighting setup," McElhenney says.

But the creative freedom came with a trade-off. To keep costs down, Landgraf asked the actors to take a lot less money up front. In return, they were offered a bigger share of profits down the line, in the form of ownership.

"We had to do it this way if we wanted to keep our investment reasonable," Landgraf says. "It can take years for a comedy to catch on. On the flip side, if it's successful, you will see a big return on your investment."

McElhenney acknowledges that the actors worked for a fraction of what his colleagues would make on, say, a CBS comedy. They worked for so little that for the first season — unsure if there would be a second — McElhenney kept his job waiting tables at a West Hollywood restaurant, often heading over after a day's shoot.

But once the show found its stride and turned profitable, McElhenney could better appreciate the method to FX's madness.

"Because it was so cheap, it allowed us to grow," he says. "If we had been very expensive in the beginning, we wouldn't have had the percentage of ownership we have now. Owning the amount of show that we do is going to garner us a fair amount of good living."

It took four years for *Sunny* to establish itself. Had the initial investment not been so modest, and had Landgraf not had access to the back-end revenue (DVD, international sales, et cetera), it would never have made it to a second season. But he believed in the show, and when his ex-partner Danny DeVito joined the cast in the series' second season, it further broadened the show's appeal.

But this also was a moment of reckoning. The budget at this point had doubled and ratings hadn't followed suit. *Sunny* seemed in danger of getting axed, until a dramatic turning point changed the show's fortunes for good: Fox decided to put *Sunny* episodes on the video website Hulu (which it co-owned) when the site launched early in 2008.

"At Hulu, they rank shows by popularity," Landgraf recalls. "*Sunny* was this little obscure show, and suddenly it was right up there with top-brand comedies like *Family Guy*, *The Simpsons* and *Saturday Night Live*."

The repercussions of *Sunny*'s unexpected success resounded through cable network hallways.

"*Sunny* was an extreme example of what cable networks have been doing for a while," Wachtel says. "One way to keep costs down is to empower original voices. If you're focused on pure writing, it's less expensive to shoot a scene with two people talking than with lots of things exploding, large ensembles and fancy office buildings."

USA Network has carved out a niche as the home of quirky procedurals with a light comic bent. Shows like *Burn Notice*, *Royal Pains* and *Monk* take tongue-in cheek spins on the spy, medical and cop genres.

One of its most successful shows, *Psych*, is now in its sixth season. Created by Steve Franks, it's about a Santa Barbara–based amateur sleuth enlisted by the police to help solve crimes because they (wrongly) believe he has psychic powers.

As a one-hour drama, *Psych* has a much higher budget than *Sunny*, but it remains one of the least expensive shows on the network. To reduce costs, the show is filmed in Canada, with Vancouver standing in for Santa Barbara. To cut down on time-consuming location moves, the three main shooting sets are all adjacent. Guest actor appearances are limited to three per week. "We can't afford to have seven red herrings," Franks says, laughing.

Veteran TV executive Rich Frank is also working under the FX low-budget umbrella, as a producer on the network's new out-there series *Wilfred*, starring Elijah Wood. Adapted from a successful Australian show, *Wilfred* has been described by writer David Zuckerman as a comedy "about a guy (Wood), the girl next door, and a mixed-breed dog, Wilfred (Jason Gann), who is part Labrador retriever and part Russell Crowe on a bender."

And just like the producers of *Sunny*, the *Wilfred* team has found ways to maximize limited resources.

"We have very few trailers and no drivers — people report directly to the set," Frank says. "We shoot with very small HD cameras, so we don't have to spend a lot of time doing lighting changes. With fewer lighting setups, we can shoot more in less time. We can even get that fourth or fifth take if we need it."

The pilot was shot in Venice, California, a location generally not favored because of the constant noise of jets from nearby Santa Monica airport. "Most people won't go down there," Frank says. "But we were able to find better locations for less money because we were willing to stop production when a plane went over." And because the production stayed local, Frank points out, "A lot of people are working here who wouldn't be if not for this model."

Frank, who also produces *Royal Pains*, acknowledges the FX model can't work for every show. "We couldn't do *Royal Pains* this way, because that's about mansions in the Hamptons, blue skies, big shots with helicopters — that's the conceit of that show."

But he adds: "I would think everybody could do some shows this way. Executives on both sides are going to have to be willing to have it look a little rougher and be shot quicker, with two cameras instead of three — and be willing to understand it's the creative elements, whether it makes you laugh or cry, that make a show successful, not whether the wall is painted green or blue."

(Clockwise from top Left): The League's Nick kroll, Mark Duplass, Stephen Rannazzis, Katie Aselto, Jon Lajoie and Paul Scheer.

(Clockwise, from upper left): Archer's Cyril Figgis as voiced by Chris Parnell, Krieger as voiced by Lucky Yates, Cheryl as voiced by Judy Greer, Pam Poovey as voiced by Amber Nash, Agent Sterling Archer as voiced by H. Jon Benjamin, and Agent Ray Gillette as voiced by Adam Reed

F. SCOTT SCAFER/ FX