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Graziadio School of Business and Management

Dean's Executive Leadership Series - 2006-2007

Transcript of Interview with Brian Frons, President of Daytime Disney ABC Television Group

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Start

Announcer: The Graziadio School of Business and Management at Pepperdine University proudly presents the Dean's Executive Leadership Series. This podcast invites top business practitioners and thought leaders to share their view on the real world of business.

Rick Gibson: Hello, and welcome, my name is Rick Gibson, I'm the Associate Vice President for Public Affairs here at Pepperdine University, and I'm joined today by Dr. Linda Livingstone, who's the Dean of the Graziadio School of Business and Management. Welcome, Linda.

Linda Livingstone: Thank you. It's good to be here today, Rick.

Rick Gibson: Well, we're here again for our second podcast in the Dean's Executive Leadership Series, and Linda I think this program has been a great success. Tell us about the series and some of those who have been participants.

Linda Livingstone: We started this series three years ago to bring in some of the foremost thinkers in business, whether they're business executives, authors or just prominent thinkers in business. We've had speakers such as Ann Sweeney, who's the President of Disney, ABC Television. We had Ted Waitt, the CEO and Founder of Gateway Computers. And then this year we started the series with Patty Sellers,

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who's an Editor at Large at *Fortune Magazine*. So it's just been a really diverse set of individuals over the last three years, and very successful.

Rick Gibson: Yeah, very impressive lineup. Tell me, how have the students responded to all of this?

Linda Livingstone: We've had great response from our students and alumni. They have really appreciated hearing from such prominent business people, and then the speakers have really been impressed with the quality of our students and alumni, as well as the kinds of questions they get when they come to the series.

Rick Gibson: Well, the latest visitor we had on the Dean's Executive Leadership Series was Brian Frons. Tell me about Brian and his visit to Pepperdine.

Linda Livingstone: Brian is the President of Daytime Disney ABC Television Group, which means that he's responsible for all of ABC Daytime, including all of their soap operas; and then he's also responsible for SOAPnet, which is where they rebroadcast soap operas; as well as Buena Vista Productions. So oversees a very interesting part of ABC Disney Television.

Rick Gibson: Well, very good. So we invite our listeners to sit back and relax, and enjoy the conversation between Linda Livingstone and Brian Frons, President of Daytime Disney ABC Television Group.

Linda Livingstone: Well, Brian, it is a pleasure to have you here with us. And I appreciate you taking the time to meet with us and answer some questions and sort of talk to our alumni and friends about what you're doing at ABC Daytime.

Brian Frons: It's my pleasure. It was difficult to give up the day in Burbank for a day in Malibu, but here I am.

Linda Livingstone: Well, we're glad to offer that anytime that we can. I have to be honest upfront before we sort of get into the Q&A, that I am probably the least qualified person to ask questions and talk to someone about daytime TV, because it's not something I watch regularly. But I'm looking forward to learning more about it today. And as you're a speaker tonight in our Dean's Executive Leadership Series.

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What I wanted to start with was sort of kind of a big picture view of what you're doing. The position that you currently serve in as President of Daytime Disney ABC Television, was created in May of 2006 to merge the Disney Daytime and the ABC Daytime TV is my understanding. Sort of a strategic move there. Talk a little bit about the philosophy behind that and how that's worked out in terms of what you've done there in kind of your first eight months or so on the job.

Brian Frons: Okay, people tend to think about network television in very historical terms. So they think about, you know, a network running a certain number of shows, and taking in the ad revenue. And what Ann Sweeney did was start to think about daytime in a different way. And we look at it as production, and we look at it as distribution. So SOAPnet was making its own shows. SOAPnet is a 24-hour, seven-day a week cable channel devoted to soap operas and their fans. ABC Daytime makes 1,000 hours of television a year, and that's "The View" and the three soap operas. And Buena Vista Productions is the programming arm of the domestic distribution company, and they make shows like "Who Wants To Be a Millionaire?," "Regis & Kelly," and "Ebert & Roeper."

So instead of looking at this in a traditional way, the thought was to say, "Okay, if we could look at all the distribution pipes equally, and all the production arms equally, what synergies can we find?" In addition, of course, the marketing opportunities. So we are in a situation now where we have people who make TV shows for ABC Daytime, starting to develop shows for SOAPnet. Buena Vista Productions is now developing shows for SOAPnet. When we do advertising campaigns now, it no longer has a tag of, "On ABC." It now says, "Daytime on ABC, Nighttimes on SOAPnet." So we start to offer the same experience but on two different platforms. And we start to think about things in a broader perspective.

Linda Livingstone: And have you seen that adding value already in the short time that you've been doing that? What sort of outcomes have you seen from that just with the work that you've done so far?

Brian Frons: Well, so far, we've certainly been able to drive ratings on both platforms. By combining the marketing power, we're obviously getting a much bigger reach, and so at the moment, we're over-delivering our budgeted ratings, both on the network, and on SOAPnet, and we still have money to spare, which is a terrific, you know, place to be.

Linda Livingstone: Over-delivering and money to spare, you can't argue with that.

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Brian Frons: No, you really can't. But you hate to bring both phrases up, because then somebody will take your money. But that's a great example of where we are. And I also have a background in both programming and helping set up cable and broadcast channels in Europe, and so I've also been able to help them a little bit in how we schedule the channel and program the channel. And indeed what we're developing, so that when we look now for original programming for SOAPnet, it's no longer just shows that sort of super-serve the soap audience. So in other words, a talk show about soaps. A biography show about soap opera stars. And the next shows you'll see are actually reality soaps. Shows that don't require you to have previous soap knowledge. Or they will be original dramas, the first original dramas that have been made for SOAPnet. So those are pretty big picture changes for the way SOAPnet's been operating, because it means, you know, fewer original hours of programming, but at much, much higher budgets; a much more extended marketing reach; and a much bigger publicity reach, because now when we travel our stars around the country, they no longer just appear on behalf of ABC, but also for SOAPnet.

ABC has benefited, a) because they also get the added marketing value. But we've also made some programs now for SOAPnet, specials that have appeared on ABC. Just recently we decided to produce a Christmas Album with ABC soap stars that happen to be Broadway performers. SOAPnet made a special—taking fans behind the scenes of the making of the album. And we ran it, sort of in a re-promoted way as "Spending Christmas Day with the soap stars." And we ran it on the 25th of December. And what that did was allow both platforms, and Hollywood Records, the Disney record label, to sell a lot of Christmas albums. So those are the kinds of early stage things that we're seeing.

Linda Livingstone: Great. Sounds like some interesting things going on. You were talking about sort of internal changes, but there's a lot of changes going on sort of externally. They're certainly influencing what's going on with sort of the various entertainment outlets, particularly television with TiVo and DVR and YouTube and so on. How are these kinds of changes in the way people are viewing television affecting what you're doing at ABC Daytime? How are you managing those kinds of changes in the marketplace?

Brian Frons: Well, in an odd way we're one of the more historic program forms, you know, when you talk about talk shows and soap operas, and strangely enough we're weathering it maybe better than some of the other day parts. Probably the best example is what's happened at my house, where I was recording the soaps that I felt were important for me to see, both my shows, and a couple of the competitors, and I have been thrown out of what we call the "media room" in our house, which is where the big plasma TV and the heavy-duty TiVo is, because my son felt I was taking up too much space, and not only was I

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taking up too much space on the hard drive, but indeed, I was conflicting with his viewing time, and in my house, the child actually controls the house via my wife. And so I acquiesced.

Linda Livingstone: That is probably not that unusual, Brian.

Brian Frons: No, we don't think so. We think we're pretty typical these days. And so in a funny way, SOAPnet, in providing a sort of a community experience in viewing has actually held up reasonably well in a TiVo environment. And if you think about a channel that's primarily re-broadcasting, you know, soaps that have aired in other time periods, you'd think that would be the most vulnerable channel out there. And in fact, it doesn't seem to be the case at all. So that's sort of one sort of good piece of news. What we actually do, I think, in terms of reaching out to our viewers is probably unique within television, and certainly within the daytime community because we have a program at Disney where we send executives around to different parts of the company, and I went through that in my first year. And I was amazed by the sort of customer management techniques of the parks, of the Disney theme parks. I thought, "Well, this is amazing that they know so much about them, and they care so much about them." And we started to take some of those ideas and convert them for television.

So when I came, there was a woman named Vanessa Marceau, who at that time was returning to "General Hospital," she's now one of the stars of the primetime show "Las Vegas." And they wanted to send—they made a very nice print ad in the marketing department. And I said, "Okay, who can we email this to? What kind of database do we have?" And we had literally no database. And today over a million women get an email from us every Friday about what's going to be on their soap operas on Monday. And obviously, that's a tremendously powerful, you know, piece of software and data, because we can tell them about the shows. We can sell them merchandise. We can encourage them to go to the Disney Theme Park every November for Super Soap Weekend. And we have actually set attendance records each of the last three years, at a time when everybody in network television is going, "Oh, woe is me. Where's my audience?" We're actually having very, you know, passionate people, you know, travel around the country. In exchange for that, I thought it was important we start a program where we now travel our stars to their hometowns. We were able to take non-program time, get it sponsored, follow our stars to about ten cities a year, and turn non-program time into commercial time, but more importantly say, "We value you so much we will come to your town to tell you and show you."

Linda Livingstone: Making it more personal connection with the audience.

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Brian Frons: Exactly. And now what's going to happen is they're gonna start to stay over an extra day, and do a day's worth of promotion for SOAPnet, in conjunction with Direct TV or Dish or the local cable outlet.

Linda Livingstone: You mentioned in that the linkage with the theme parks and finding some connections there, and one of the things we've read about in recent days is the revamping of Disney.com and how important that is in the broader strategy of Disney. Does that website link at all to what you're doing? How do you connect what you're doing in daytime television with sort of the internet presence of Disney in a way that's useful to both of those?

Brian Frons: To be honest, I haven't spent that much time. Bob just sort of rolled out the Disney.com thing, and you know, from what I saw of it at the presentation in Florida at the management meeting, you still find your space of what you're looking for, in our case, ABC.com, the daytime part of it or SOAPnet, and we also have something called Soapnetic, which is a broadband service. One other structural change I've made is that I've now put those three units under one person for the creative vision and one person as a partner to that person as the business had, if you will, the MBA that's gonna make it profitable, not just a nice place to dump money, because we want to be digital. And what they've come back with is a nice strategy that interlinks the three properties. The two sort of broadcast-related properties, if you will. And also the broadband product, which is primarily something you would get on your mobile phone, or through your cable operator, and that's up to around 13 million homes in less than a year, which we think is pretty good, especially since we'll be making money, which is something nobody's used to.

What we're trying to do is find all the different things the audience really wants on those digital sites. So the basics, you know, "What happened on today's episode? What happened in the past? Why do these two people hate each other? Why are they in love with each other? Where's the family tree so I can understand why that woman with a different face, who's now playing Carlie, who's she related to again, because I thought it used to be somebody else. And who the heck is she?" As well as now capturing some of the heat behind "The View." You can now go to the website and watch the greatest moments of that day's "View."

Linda Livingstone: I actually was doing that yesterday, 'cause I thought I should educate myself a little bit about this, so I was actually watching some of those clips, which was really quite fascinating to see some of those.

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Brian Frons: Oh good. So we're trying to make it immersive. We're trying to make it a useful place. We're hoping to build up the community. Soap opera and daytime viewing is something, you know, people are used to doing together. And one of the interesting things that came out of the theme park experience is talking to women at the park, and them telling us that not only do they want to see the stars and get autographs, they wanted to talk to someone else that was in the club, that appreciated the history that they had of the show, and of the stars and of the characters, and you know, just sort of bond over what was, you know, in your home an intimate experience, but in truth, a very large communal experience.

Linda Livingstone: It's really a way to embed social networking in multiple ways through the experience that they have, whether it's online or in those personal connections that you give them as well.

Brian Frons: Oh, absolutely, because that is at the core of soap opera transference. You know, if you ask a woman, "How did you start watching?" Invariably it's: my mom, my sister, my babysitter, my friend, my older sister. And so in a funny way what we've done is taken what's always been traditionally a face-to-face community, and made it a digital community.

Linda Livingstone: You talk about that transference from generation to generation to some extent, have you seen any changes as this sort of Generation Y, the Millennial Generation, sort of on the lower end of your primary demographic women, 18-49, are you seeing different things that they're looking for in daytime programming, and how are you adapting to that while not losing that sort of core that you've had for so long?

Brian Frons: Yeah, that's sort of the topic we discuss the most, all the time. And it really revolves around several different ways, I suppose. The first was to really do some serious research about that generation and understand some of the differences. As a Boomer, I couldn't wait to get out of the house on the weekends. I said, "Goodbye" on Saturday morning, I came back in time for dinner, unless I was gonna stay at a friend's house, if he was gonna have a better dinner. You know, and you would actually negotiate with your mother to see whether or not you wanted to stay around. I cannot get my son out of the house. He regards us as his friends; he likes the fact that we have the big screen and the computer, and the X-Box 360 and so on. His friends like to come to our house. And what we found—and that translated into kinds of stories kids wanted to see.

So in "General Hospital" 25 years ago, they wanted to see the 19-year-old and the 23-year-old on the run. And today they want to see stories about the father who never really wanted to be a father bond with his

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teenage daughter. They want to see the inter-generational stories, and they want to relate to the families in a totality. And the great thing for us is that if you're an older viewer, you want to hear that your kids like you. And that your friends' kids, on TV, like them. And so a lot of it gets wrapped up that way, and so what you start to see then is a lot of characters on our shows being very much like their parent, the character that our older viewers always loved; or they choose to be the opposite of who their parents are. You know, I'm over-generalizing, but in truth, that's a lot of what we do. But what that allows is the older audience to very quickly get an idea of who they are, because they certainly know if you're Susan Lucci, Erica Kane's daughter, you know what that means. You know, you are the daughter of the diva. "I got it." And you're either Kendall, who's just like her, or Bianca, who is really the magnified good that's somewhere in Erica that is rarely found by anyone other than her late mother, Mona. So, that's a lot of it. And the other part of it, I suppose is that we brought some younger people onto the writing staffs, the producing staffs, my network supervisory staff. And we communicate our advertising in a different way, so you'll see us more online or on an MTV than you would have 15 or 20 years ago.

Linda Livingstone: Interesting that what you're finding to attract that audience in terms of stories is really resonating with the older audience as well, which is, of course, the ideal setting to have, where it's working for both demographics.

Brian Frons: Some days it does.

Linda Livingstone: Well, we've talked a lot about sort of strategy and the big picture, but I'm sure you've talked about this recently; we were talking about this earlier. But let's talk about what people are really wanting to know...so what's going on with Rosie and Donald and how does that affect what you do in your job?

Brian Frons: Boy, I can't believe I have anything to add to that, but you know, I think simply we hired Rosie, you know, because Rosie is someone with great opinions. She's a tremendous intellect, and the size of her heart is actually matched by her intellect. She's a very compassionate person. She was doing a lot of philanthropic work that I was unaware of. She has two foundations; she's building a school for underprivileged kids in New York to assume leadership positions in the City, to have a chance to be on Broadway in the City. And has done a tremendous amount of good, as well, down in Baton Rouge with Katrina survivors, where she's actually set up a little town. So here's somebody that has this enormous reservoir of good in her, but at the same time if you are victimizing women, or you are not good to your child, or you are a gay basher, she will look you in the eye and come at you like a middle linebacker.

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And what happened a couple of weeks ago was that she looked at Donald Trump and what was going on with his judgment of Miss USA, and came out on air, and this is not private news, and said, "Listen, this is a man who has cheated on his first wife; cheated on his second wife, and doesn't seem to be that—maybe—a moral guy, so why is he sitting as a moral compass for a 20-year-old young woman who may have some kind of problem?" Reasonable point of view—maybe—if you're not Donald; if you're Rosie, sure. And that escalated to her sharing some things she had read on a Wiki, which involved financial things. One or two of which were, you know, not totally defined in terms of personal bankruptcy versus company bankruptcy. We clarified that on the air, but you know, Donald is a guy who's got a show that's melting away, and you know, "Apprentice" premiered, you know, just a couple of days ago with the lowest rated premiere of the four seasons so far. And he's a man looking for ratings. And he's chasing pretty hard, and today, as I sit here, he's you know, talking to ET and Insider and whatever, and waving around the letter that he sort of published to the free world, but addressed to Rosie that, you know, Barbara doesn't like her, betrayed her, doesn't want her, whatever.

Linda Livingstone: It's your own built-in soap opera within "The View."

Brian Frons: Indeed. Far more than I would like, but yes. And I suppose the great news for us is that out of it, I think, Barbara and Rosie's commitment to each other is actually stronger than, I think anybody that tunes in tomorrow-- which is actually be the 10th of January, for those who are listening to this later and suddenly running to their TV-- which is fine by me. You can run to the TV whenever you want. You know, they will have an answer for him on-air, because we sort of feel that "The View" is the show we would like to see higher ratings on, and indeed, last week, the week, you know, when the feud broke, we actually had the highest ratings in the history of the show, which is a ten-year-old show. This is not something that happens very normally. You know? And so we're very happy, and you know, it seems like we're getting a lot more out of it than he is. But you know, still, watching somebody flail away is not always the most pleasant thing, so hopefully it'll find the end soon.

Linda Livingstone: Play its way out over time. Well, I was gonna sort of ask how those kinds of situations sort of impact you. It sounds like in this situation from a viewer perspective; everything has actually enhanced your ratings and issues. I mean, there's sort of the saying that, "Any publicity is good publicity." I don't know if you feel that way or not in terms of these kinds of situations with your various shows that you have on.

Brian Frons: I sort of feel that any publicity is good publicity for a little while. You know, I don't know that I want people to feel that there's going to be tremendous anxiety on the show every day, or a lot of

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bickering on the show every day. You know, again, somebody who's not sitting there, or god forbid, that, you know, that Donald would have been able to actually stir something up between the two of them, which he has not. And I think the audience will be done with it shortly, because I think, you know, another week of bad ratings for him, where next week he'll be head-to-head with "Desperate Housewives," you know, I just think people are gonna sit and say, "Okay, we know what this is about." And people are already saying it. I mean, I was sitting in a local market, and you know, the local newscaster had heard the latest thing, and he said, "Oh, I guess "The Apprentice" is premiering soon." You know, people know. Americans are very savvy, and so I think, you know, time's running out.

Linda Livingstone: You know, a lot of what goes on in daytime, especially with the soaps is these sort of serials that some of them have lasted 40 years. How do you over time sort of keep those storylines fresh and not sort of repeat the same old thing? How do you do that, especially with multiple of those going on at any given time? I mean, there's probably quite an art to that.

Brian Frons: It's far more math than art, I'm afraid. You know, it's really the hardest thing, because you know, these shows really were not invented to last 70 years. You know, back in the day on radio and the early days of television, these things went on, they went off, they went on, they went off. And yes, there were a few that were long-running, but you know, they tended to reflect whatever was going on in the day. "General Hospital" went on because of the doctor shows, you know, "Ben Casey," "Dr. Kildare." Somebody said, "let's do a daytime soap in a hospital." You know, and then here we are all these years later, you know, after, you know, saving the world from freezing and god knows what. Where are we? Well, we're back with hospital shows being hot, and you know, good for us. And "GH" has terrific ratings. And I'm sure, though, that the things that are resonating on "Grey's," resonate there, and it's an inspiration to us to reach a little higher out of the cliché. And the weird thing about a cliché, which we never really discuss, but Agnes Nixon said it to me one day, so I think that makes it worth repeating, since she invented two of our best shows, she said, "Brian, you have to remember, it's a cliché because the first 40 times we did it, it worked." Which I thought was just perfect.

And so the best thing I say, I think that I've ever heard, and I repeat is that, "If you can come up with a story that's reflective of what's happening now in the society that you could not do ten years ago, then you have a much better chance of it being fresh." So on "General Hospital," we have a young woman who is trying to be a doctor despite being HIV positive. Well, that's not a story they would have done in 1975. You know, or maybe 1985. So you know, how is that young woman who grew up on the show, you know, living with it, shaping a life and whatever? And you know, that has a lot of poignancy for, you know, the viewers. And the other technique I would say is ripping things from the headlines. You know, when the New Jersey governor revealed that he was both married and gay, you know, we ripped that story off. We

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did it on “One Life,” it took them to number one for the first time in a zillion years. And, you know, it was terrific TV. And that’s probably the best way to find stories in real people and real situations, rather than, you know, another evil twin, another person back from the dead, another question of whose baby really is it? I don’t think for the most part those things are going to get us any new viewers, especially at the young end.

Linda Livingstone: You know, as we sort of wrap up our time together, and it’s been really wonderful, it’s been interesting for me, two questions to kind of conclude our discussion, you know, what are the things that keep you up at night, first question. The second question is, what are the things that get you out of bed in the morning and get you excited about going to work each day?

Brian Frons: I would say the thing that, you know, worries me most is the thing that I can’t figure out. You know, I was very lucky, because I spend time in Europe working for an entrepreneur. So if I can figure out where I wanted to go, or what we wanted to do, he really taught me that you don’t worry about all those hills and people and problems and valleys, and you know, people throwing rocks at you, or whatever, in the way. Just, you know, you’ll figure it out. You have confidence in that. My concern is always when I don’t see the next hill. You know, and then once I sort of break through that, then I don’t worry about it anymore. You know, “What kind of original show should we do with SOAPnet?” Okay, that kept me up for a few nights until sort of the obvious hit me. “Well, why don’t we expand what the definition is of what a soap is?” and so that leads you to a reality soap. And then, “How financially do we figure out a way to do original drama, you know, at a good price, at a reality price?” We figured that out by using some of the stages and people that are already with ABC daytime, or even doing something in Canada.

And so suddenly that was open, then it’s-- then, you know, I’m not going to worry at night what the show’s going to be, because they’ll come. They always come. They always do. That’s, you know, the marketplace. The things that excite me in the morning are really new ideas. The days I’m going to sit down with the staff, or sit, you know, get up and have a meeting with a writer, to have them tell me something they’re excited to put on television, or if I have an idea which happens. You know, that’s exciting. Because any time you can take something from a blank piece of paper or from a blank desk, you know, and then see it on TV three or four weeks later, how cool is that? And they pay you, you know?

Linda Livingstone: Can’t beat that.

Brian Frons: Can’t beat that. So those are the things that really get me excited. That and a New York Yankees baseball game, that’s right up there.

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Linda Livingstone: There ya go. Well, it has been a pleasure talking with you Brian, and we really appreciate you taking the time to be here. Not only to be interviewed for our podcast, but also to speak at our Dean's Executive Leadership Series. So thank you very much.

Brian Frons: My pleasure. Thank you.

Rick Gibson: That concludes our interview with Brian Frons. Linda, fascinating discussion. Tell me, who is-- who's in the lineup next?

Linda Livingstone: Our next guest coming up on Tuesday, March 13th is Dennis Tito, the CEO of Wilshire Associates, Incorporated. He's really credited with developing the field of quantitative analytics to analyze market risks. So that should be fascinating. And in addition to that, he was the first individual to pay to travel in space, so quite a diverse discussion we will have. And then in April we're featuring Bill George, the former CEO of Medtronic. So several wonderful speakers coming up. We hope people will join us for those.

Rick Gibson: Well, we look forward to the rest of the series. Well, thank you for joining us today.

Linda Livingstone: It's my pleasure, Rick.

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End