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Programming Shines at the PBS Annual Meeting

by Timothy Oleary

Amidst the side conversations around consolidation, nationalized fundraising initiatives and concerns about federal funding, there was plenty to be hopeful about coming out of the PBS Annual Meeting held in mid-May in Orlando, Fla.

First and foremost, the programs in the primetime pipeline are really good. At the end of the day, we deliver our values to the public through our television and online services in the form of programs, and there is a lot to be excited about. Watching the preview clips seemed to help re-energize the room and remind us all why we are in this wonderful world of public broadcasting.

Strong upcoming seasons from *Masterpiece*, *Antiques Roadshow*, *Nature*, *American Experience*, *P.O.V.*, *Independent Lens* and more will complement the new approach of *Frontline* and documentary specials like Ken Burns' *Prohibition*.

Even more encouraging for development professionals and audiences alike are the new national initiatives. The **PBS Fall Arts Festival**, a nine-week celebration anchored by performing arts specials from different markets and different genres remind us all of PBS's place as "the nation's stage." From opera and ballet, to theatre and a concert performance by Pearl Jam, the Fall Arts Festival gives us a tremendous opportunity to engage viewers as prospects, partner with other arts organizations, reach out to underwriters and major donors, and raise a heck of a lot of money.

Equally exciting is the **Women and Girls Lead** initiative with its 50-plus documentaries that share the stories of women around the globe leading change in the world. ITVS has brought star power to the forefront here by partnering with celebrities and leaders like Geena Davis and Abigail Disney. Again, fundraising opportunities abound if we choose to seize them.

We plan to explore these opportunities in much more detail at the upcoming **McPherson Public Broadcasting Co-op Meeting**, July 12-13 in Pittsburgh, Pa.

So with all of that said, here is a summary of key takeaways from this year's PBS Annual Meeting:

- The brand remains as strong as ever, so no need to keep defending it. Instead, let's capitalize on it by engaging more viewers and prospects.
- The growing retention problem is really an acquisition and stewardship problem as much as anything else. We have to improve current methods for acquiring new members, find new and innovative ways to build prospect lists and engage new members, and we must implement integrated conversion series to convert prospects and upgrade new members.

- Fewer and fewer resources at individual stations make collaboration more critical to survival than ever. Shared projects through the **McPherson Public Broadcasting Co-op** and **Contributor Development Partnership** are necessary for stations to keep current fundraising levels and have any hope of growing their programs.
- Sustainer growth has been quite good at some stations, while many are still lagging behind. Investment in this area improves the long-term value of donors and saves the station money immediately. The ROI of sustainer programs is well-documented and there are now several good models from stations like WGBH and TPT for how to grow this segment of donors to more than 10% of your active file.
- The Explorer archetype approach to communicating with viewers and prospects is alive and well. A key finding we have seen is that the Explorer method works best as an engagement tool. If done well, converting an engaged prospect to a donor is much easier. While we will continue to use Explorer language and phrases in fundraising efforts, the real value of this approach is in grabbing attention and drawing viewers and online users further in to our story.