

Michael Bloomberg

By Mark Robichaux -- Broadcasting & Cable

Many TV viewers feel like they know New York City, even if they've never set foot there.

In such hits as *Sex and the City* and *Law & Order*, iconic images serve as a reminder that the big city is as much a character as Carrie Bradshaw and Lennie Briscoe. And few individuals have done more to put New York in the spotlight than Mayor Michael Bloomberg.

Following a career in which he pioneered business TV with Bloomberg Television, Bloomberg breathed new life into the Office of Film, Theatre and Broadcasting. Under this mayor, film and television production is thriving in New York City. The number of location shooting days in New York has more than doubled in four years to 31,570.

The mayor says that, like any good business, the city is just exploiting its assets: "We touted what we have — New York's incredible locales — to lure projects from all over the world here."

Bloomberg also has recast WNYE, the TV station owned by the city and occupying channel 25, into NYCTV, an entertaining, hip outlet that has become a model for other municipal television stations around the nation. (The city still has five other cable channels that air municipal events and meetings.)

Much of the city's show-biz success is due to an economic-incentive plan launched in late 2004. It includes a 15% city-state tax credit for qualified productions and was such a hit that the city reached the \$50 million allocation limit in 13 months. The city expanded the program in July, allocating \$30 million per year through 2011. According to the city, in its first year, the tax credit brought 10,000 jobs and \$1.5 billion to New York.

In the past, film companies frequently shot key landmark scenes in New York, then ran to Canada—where production costs are lower—and filmed the rest. Mayor Bloomberg sought to bring them back with free permits, as well as free police and location shots. When permits are required, they're expedited.

"You pay quite dearly for this in other parts of the world," says Katherine Oliver, commissioner of the Office of Film, Theatre and Broadcasting. "This represents a significant savings."

"Mayor Bloomberg and his office of television and film have done an incredible job helping producers in New York," says Dick Wolf, executive producer of the wildly popular *Law & Order* shows, three of which are being filmed in New York this season. "Their tax incentives have been instrumental in attracting new projects and keeping existing projects here."

Film- and TV-production companies aren't lured here by tax credits alone; they are also attracted to the free advertising on city-owned media, such as bus shelters and phone kiosks. A discount card, which is issued to all active New York City productions, offers markdowns of at least 10% at more than 550 local businesses.

More than anything, Oliver says that Mayor Bloomberg saw a business opportunity in TV. "What our customers want is quick, easy access to locations," says Oliver. "When they need to shoot in a bar or in a court, we make that happen."

Before, says Oliver, "film and TV and entertainment as a whole wasn't as valued." By contrast, the mayor "gets the media business, and he understands it."

Nowhere is the mayor's vision more apparent than at NYCTV. When he became mayor, Bloomberg demanded that the city-owned channel 25 become something more than just a showcase for dull city meetings.

"He wanted to do things differently, with a broad transparent city government," says Arick Wierson, NYCTV general manager, who helped reformat the broadcast channel.

Bloomberg initiated other services to help citizens better communicate with their city. One of the first improvements was the 311 program, a simple one-phone-call solution for citizens who need non-emergency help. Another is the city's Website, an interactive service that informs and transacts with citizens daily. The TV station is "the third leg," says Wierson.

With fun and hip shows like *Eat Out New York* and *Cool in Your Code*, the once sleepy station has won 14 Emmys, and the audience has exploded. On an average night, about 100,000 viewers watch NYCTV. Other big cities are now asking the station for pointers. Wierson has bigger plans. He's taking NYC TV to the National Association of Television Programming Executives' convention next January, where he will try to sell program formats to traditional commercial stations.

"We inadvertently stumbled in this issue of localism," says Wierson. "I think one of the legacies many people will point to is the rebirth of non-news local-content programming across the country. We've figured out a model to attract a large audience at a low price point." The station's annual budget is about \$6 million.

Recently, the NBC-owned WNBC agreed to air several NYCTV shows on its daytime schedule in an unusual deal that gives the station inexpensive programming for daytime while giving NYCTV wider distribution and an opportunity to sell commercial time.

Bloomberg is no stranger to the media. He was a general partner at Salomon Brothers before starting his empire with Bloomberg LP in the early 1990s, selling financial-information terminals to traders on Wall Street—with data and pictures on the same screen.

"He was doing something in broadcasting that no one else was doing," says Oliver, who served as general manager of Bloomberg Radio and Television. Today, Bloomberg TV reaches 200 million homes worldwide via 10 networks in seven languages.

"I have to laugh when I hear about podcasting," says Oliver. "We were doing that in 1992." the special *Seven Secrets of Grand Central*.