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New From City Hall, TV Worth Watching

Revamped Cable Station Tries to Brighten the Dull

By JENNIFER STEINHAUER

It is safe to assume that the person who sat in bed last Monday night plowing through a pint of Ben & Jerry's while watching "For Love or Money" on NBC would not have been easily lured by the City Council proclamation ceremony broadcast at the same time on NYC TV.

But NYC TV, which has replaced Crosswalks Television as New York City's cable station, is trying hard to bring professionalism and a soupçon of hipness to the world of low-cost government television.

It is not simple — the staple fare of municipal television is dominated by Council hearings on waste management, mayoral news conferences, traffic reports and the like. But creative new programming, slick graphics and cutaway shots of celebrities like Hugh Grant peppered in between views of the Van Wyck Expressway at rush hour are part of the attempt to transform a once earnest but arid station into a more relevant and cooler draw for people interested in the inner workings of the city.

"In its former form, Crosswalks was virtually unwatchable," said Gino P. Menchini, the city's information technology commissioner, who oversees the city's television stations. "It was poorly produced and had the opposite effect in bringing people in. Now, while we still give appropriate attention to gavel-to-gavel City Council hearings, there is a mix of programming that is interesting and supports the broader mission of the city."

Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg's distaste for television is so profound that his aides have to tell him about his own coverage. He has yet to see an episode of "The Sopranos."

But he has thrown his support behind the scrappy new station, which embodies some of his favorite themes: doing more with less, improving agencies through technology and letting New Yorkers peek under the hood of the customer-service side of government.

Crosswalks' face-lift comes after the introduction of 311, the city's new central hot line, and a new look for New York's Web site.

"All of these initiatives follow Mayor Bloomberg's mandate to open up government and make it easily accessible to all New Yorkers," said Vincent La Padula, the senior adviser to the mayor.

Random programming that once was shown on Crosswalks in no apparent order has been replaced with a schedule of rotating programs. New programs, like "\$9.99," which explores inexpensive ways to pass the day in the city, and a show from the TriBeCa Film Festival spice up the mix. News conferences and hearings are now live.

"I think they have done an incredible job of revamping what was a very old sort of irrelevant television station," said Shelly Palmer, a trustee of the National Academy of Television Arts and Sciences. "Now it actually calls attention to



Julie Laipply, top, the host of NYC TV's "\$9.99," gives tips on inexpensive activities. "Executive Breakfast" replays official talks. The actor Tony Randall appears on a promotional clip.

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itself. Yeah, it does have a 'made with loving hands at home' aesthetic value, but they have taken it to a street look, which is more relevant to contemporary culture. It is young and fresher."

Last year, Mr. Menchini turned his attention to the city's five cable stations, which are available to the 1.8 million cable subscribers in the five boroughs. The portfolio includes NYC TV 71, which broadcasts Off-Track Betting programming, and NYC TV 73, which features more OTB programming and "leased" content, like Chinese soap operas and other ethnic programming. The leased shows help pay for the other stations, which under the public television laws cannot accept advertising.

CUNY TV 75 broadcasts City University of New York programming, and NYC TV 93 features "Digital Magazine," an electronic bulletin board of local events and government information.

But the flagship station, Channel 74, is where the city puts its creative resources to work. Still, the station will not be mistaken for MTV. Even the coolest of packaging, like the modern orange logo, surrounds what is essentially highly nerdy fare on a public-service station: for instance, hours of live scenes from streets around the city, in a program called "City Drive Live," which is meant to keep drivers up to speed on traffic conditions.

But for people who want to learn more about how New York City works, or about its history, the channel offers much. There is "City Classics," which features vintage documentaries, news conferences, speeches and other historical clips culled from New York's extensive archives. The clips can be interesting, like that of Muhammad Ali sparring on the steps of City Hall, and of Congresswoman Shirley Chisholm's fiery 1972 speech at City College.

"City Classics" also reveals how little some things change in New York City, even as its physical landscape has been transformed. Mayor John V. Lindsay, his polls in the tank, held cranky news conferences in the Blue Room at City Hall — it seems the only real difference between those conferences and today's is the height of the man in power.

And there is video of a 1976 news conference held in front of a mobile home that was parked at City Hall to protest a property tax hike. It could have been filmed this year, except for the fetching if inexplicable hat worn by one of the female protesters, the sort rarely seen outside church these days.

Other programming includes "Executive Breakfast," a replay of talks given by government officials and business leaders in New York; "Cultural Corners," which gives the low-down on arts and entertainment supported by the city; and "\$9.99," about inexpensive activities in areas ranging from Lower Manhattan to Long Island City. (It is not impossible that Julie Lalpally, the host of "\$9.99," can do for Steinway Street what Maria Bartiromo did for convertible bonds.)

Most of the programs offer a hefty dose of city boosterism. Anyone for

"Parade Town USA," a Sunday morning program that replays the many ethnic parades around the city?

And sometimes, the shoestring budget is evident in poor sound quality during events taped outdoors. Much of the programming is done on location, because the only studio in the Municipal Building consists of a blue piece of fabric and a stool where stand-up shots are done, and a closet (literally) where commissioners and others record their public-service announcements, which run frequently on NYC TV.

This production office, as well as the studio on the CUNY campus in the Bronx where the shows are actually broadcast from, will be moved into 11 Metrotech in Brooklyn by early next year.

But Arick Wierson and Seth Unger, who run the station on an annual budget of \$1.5 million, have found many ways to make the most of their resources. For "\$9.99," for instance, the station draws heavily on city agencies to provide the preproduction work and content about things like parks, museums and other attractions. "City Drive Live" uses traffic cameras already being used by the Department of Transporta-

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tion.

Volunteers do things like the stand-up shots during "City Drive Live," praising the virtues of the MetroCard or giving other traffic tips.

NYC TV staff members have been known to corner celebrities at events to get them to do promotions, which are shown frequently and provide a Hollywood twist. And the station is connected with local universities and a professional group of computer and video artists who provide technical training for the staff in exchange for broadcast time for their short, often quirky pieces on life in New York, like a clip about a man who paints windows for stores and restaurants.

Mr. Wierson, taking cues from Mayor Bloomberg, is also seeking corporate sponsorship much the way other public television stations do, and he has tried to use new technology to save time and money. For example, a camera operator used to spend half a day driving film to the studio in the Bronx, but Mr. Wierson found a way to transmit the material electronically.

NYC TV is clearly aiming for an audience outside of those obsessed with government. In one promotion, a woman is seen moving from her bathroom and its upscale grooming products into an expensive suit and off into a cab, apparently to be a guest on "Executive Breakfast."

"It was a crazy notion that New York City's television station should be boring," said Mr. Unger. "NYC TV's mission is to inform while being entertaining and interesting."