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TV News

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ABC confirms Katie Couric talk show

Long-awaited talkshow pact calls for anchor to contribute to ABC News

By CYNTHIA LITTLETON

ABC's pursuit of Katie Couric was driven in large part by the desire to rev up the Alphabet's fortunes in what has become a moribund daypart for most network and syndie fare: daytime.

Setting the pact for a Couric-hosted talkshow to bow in the fall of 2012 comes on the heels of ABC's decision to replace two of its long-running soaps, "One Life to Live" and "All My Children," with two new lifestyle-centric unscripted series, "The Chew" and "The Revolution."

Sweeney said ABC was committed to gaining renewed traction in daytime hours (usually defined as 9 a.m. to 3 p.m.), which has prompted the rethink of its strategy and the taking of bold steps like axing the decades-old underperforming sudser. In announcing the Couric deal, however, ABC made a point of reaffirming its commitment to its lone surviving soap, "General Hospital," which will move to a different timeslot in most markets once Couric's yakker bows.

"Daytime is and should be as competitive a daypart as primetime," Disney/ABC TV Group topper Anne Sweeney told Variety. "Every year when we're assembling a primetime schedule, we aim to have every show be the right show for the right timeslot. I think the same holds true in daytime. The changes we've made in daytime reflect our belief that there are viewers there for us. And we think there are viewers who are very excited by the prospect of Katie Couric coming to the afternoon with a talkshow."

One of the most troubling signs for the Big Three in daytime is the older-skewing profile of the aud. ABC's soaps for years were magnets for young femmes, but generational changes and the migration of women into the workforce outside the home has taken a toll of the viewership base of traditional daytime serials.

CBS in the past two years also pulled the plug on its sudser staples, "As the World Turns" and "Guiding Light," in an effort to rebuild the daypart.

At present, the median age for CBS' daytime lineup is 59. ABC's is 56, followed by NBC at 53.

When Couric's services became available, ABC made an opportunistic move to land not only her daytime show but her services as a contributor to ABC News. Couric segued out of CBS last month after a mixed track record during her five-year run as anchor of "CBS Evening News." ABC News



Couric



Sweeney

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said Couric would be a "utility player" for the news division with plans for her to "anchor specials, contribute interviews, participate in special events coverage."

Couric formally starts her new gig in August and expects to begin appearing on ABC News broadcasts by late summer.

As for the syndie yakker, ABC is going to great lengths to make room on its eight O&Os for the show in the 3 p.m. slot.

The 3 p.m. hour at present is network time for ABC affils, but by the fall of 2012, the network will return that hour to the stations. That makes room for the show on the ABC O&Os and will also likely juice demand for the show in other markets. With ABC affils suddenly needing to fill the 3 p.m. hour, a key lead-in slot for local news, there will likely be some timeslot jostling among established syndie shows, which could lead to openings for Couric on non-ABC affils as well.

The ABC O&Os cover nearly 23% of U.S. TV households, including the key markets of New York, L.A. and Chicago. Disney's domestic syndie arm will distribute the show to stations in other markets.

The show will originate from Gotham and will be exec produced by Jeff Zucker, marking a reunion for Couric with the producer who helped her first make her mark (and his) on NBC's "Today" in the early 1990s. Couric and Zucker will own the syndie show outright, setting them up for a huge payday if it proves successful.

ABC's 3 p.m. slot at present is occupied by sudser "General Hospital" in Eastern and Central time zone markets (sudser airs at 2 p.m. on the West Coast.) In announcing the Couric deal, ABC made a point of affirming its "support" for the long-running soap. Insiders emphasized that ABC's long-term plans include keeping the soap on its air, albeit in a different timeslot in most markets.

CBS had been an early contender for Couric's show, along with Warner Bros. and NBC. But during the past six weeks her suitors narrowed to only ABC, amid concerns about the financial terms of the deal proposed by Couric's team and the depth of her commitment to the arduous work of doing a daily syndie yakker.

Couric said she was well aware of the challenges in daytime. She said she was excited about the opportunity to shape her own show from scratch.

"I don't know of any job where you walk in and are guaranteed to be a success. That's part of the fun of something like this," Couric told Variety. "It think it's an exciting opportunity and creatively a huge challenge. I'm looking forward to the managerial aspects of leading this show in addition to the creative (work)."

Couric said she and Zucker are still working out the specifics of the show, but it will focus on topical issues, pop culture, newsmakers and the reaction of everyday people to the news of the day.

"Sometimes it'll be a single-topic hour, sometimes it'll be multiple segments," she said.

Sweeney's drive to land Couric fired up the toppers of the various divisions of the Alphabet that will be impacted by Couric's move, with the deal orchestrated by ABC News prexy Ben Sherwood, ABC O&O topper Rebecca Campbell, Disney/ABC Domestic TV chief Janice Marinelli and ABC biz affairs topper Jana Winograde. Couric's team was principally headed by CAA's Alan Berger, attorney Craig Jacobson and Zucker.

Contact Cynthia Littleton at cynthia.littleton@variety.com

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