

## Against the Grain

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So I'm watching channel 23 at home - because it's nice to watch programming people *want* to make, not what a network thinks I and my demographic would enjoy - and I noticed something odd. I don't mean the usual late-night weird stuff, like people singing to their shoes, but a trend, actually. Most of our shows, despite the near-limitless freedom of content and style, still try to emulate what's seen on network TV.

Before I start rambling about, "thinking outside the box" and all that, let's examine this trend a bit further. My theory: the goal of many access shows is to present their material in a production style that replicates mainstream programming. Now, this has its merits, but that's a different article. Let's analyze: what does a network program to do? It tries to reach the largest possible audience (within a certain demographic, usually) for the purpose of ratings/advertising dollars. Since mass appeal is the goal, creative elements that may turn off some viewers are kept to a safe limit. To compensate, they add the polish that deep pockets can provide: attractive talent, fancy graphics, high-end equipment -glitz that hides the formula. Well that just happens to be...the exact opposite concept of access programming!

Access isn't about formula; it's doing what you want, as you want it to look, at whatever length. You don't have to compromise to the masses- they're not your audience. You don't have broadcast equipment, but that doesn't matter. Joe Viewer at home is just pleased that you've taped something he enjoys but can't see anywhere else. Bocce, alternative music videos, Korean worship services, where else could you find these?

But I want to talk about the look, not the content, of your show. So what should you be doing? Well work to the strengths of the access, not its weaknesses. I say let loose your grip on "the formula" and just be *different*. Who says your name key has to be bottom-center of the person? Must all our talk shows have a desk and chairs? Why can't you shoot a program in black & white? Sticking to "how it's always done" may be safe, but certainly not distinctive. If you're going to put so much effort into a show, why not give it a creative voice that stands out from the rest?

Whether it's a baby step or a leap forward, if you are an MVCC producer you need to at least *try* something different. Identify the show elements you've maintained for so long they've become routine - your set, graphics, camera placement, even the style of the program - and imagine how it would look if you did the opposite - with a creative twist. Tape a talk show out to a grassy field. If you're doing 1-camcorder sketch comedy, do a deadpan intro using our Chromakey wall. Instead of a credit roll, shoot Post-It notes with the crew's names penned in. Incorporate a studio audience, even if it's just your camera operators and some friends. Go live, if for no other reason than to foster some fresh enthusiasm in your crew.

Making a few steps against the grain will help foster your creativity, and your show will benefit. More importantly, it will put you in the right frame of mind; once you've overcome your initial resistance to change, bigger and better ideas will follow. The result is a show that's original, more fun to make, and better reflects the vision of the producer and the spirit of the channel.