



2008-2009 Daytime Ratings Are In: GH is Worst Performing ABC Soap! GH Loses Viewers While CBS and NBC Competitors Show Gains

Sara Bibel, writer of Fancast's *Deep Soap*, recently reported that at the official end of the 2008-2009 daytime broadcast season, ABC/General Hospital's total audience and the 18-49 female target audience declined 13% each. However, All My Children only declined 5% and 8%, respectively, and OLTL declined 10% and 8%, respectively. Surprisingly, in total households, NBC's Days of Our Lives actually **gained** viewers (over 100,000) and CBS' The Young and the Restless **increased** viewership by 10% in the 18-34 female audience.

The SOS/Save Our Soap! General Hospital Campaign remains deeply concerned about GH's ratings versus those of its competitors. In the last two weeks ending September 25, 2009, GH lost 107,000 viewers since the heavily promoted carnival story, while almost every other soap opera gained viewers. Approximately 60% of GH's decline in viewers occurred in the important target market of the 18-49 female demographic. For the most recent week ending September 25, 2009, GH was down 111,000 viewers from last year, while Y&R showed an increase of 83,000 viewers and DOOL had an increase of 293,000 viewers as it continues to move ahead of GH in total viewers from last year.

While many have predicted the demise of the soap opera genre or lamented that the decline is simply a sign of the times, clearly Y&R and DOOL proved last year that gains in viewership **can and do** occur. Bibel adds that the numbers from the year-end analysis revealed quite unexpectedly that, "contrary to the conventional wisdom, young women are not abandoning daytime dramas." Every single soap maintained its ratings among women 18-34 versus the prior year. Not even Guiding Light declined and Y&R improved 10% in this demographic, from 1.0 to 1.1. Bibel concludes that "the generation that has supposedly walked away from daytime network television is watching the soaps." These are the very people networks and advertisers are clamoring to attract. So what does this mean? Most significantly it means that it is the older, long-time viewers who are abandoning daytime.

Granted, the drops daytime television is experiencing are largely in keeping with network television as a whole, which in turn begs the question; does daytime viewing affect primetime viewing? Clearly, the answer is yes, as is evidenced by the latest Nielsen data for the 18-49 top 25 ranking for the week ending September 27, 2009, where CBS held 10 of the 25 spots compared to ABC holding 6.

That may not seem like a big difference, but CBS currently only produces 2.5 hours of soap opera programming and Y&R has consistently been the No. 1 ranked soap opera. Conversely, ABC produces 3 hours of soap opera programming and all three have been inconsistent in their rankings, dropping as low as the number 6 spot some weeks. This leads to the logical conclusion that more viewers watching during the daytime and seeing the primetime commercials increases the likelihood of those same viewers watching primetime shows on that same network, while soaps with fewer viewers will have fewer opportunities to grab the attention of primetime viewers. One fan explained recently that she had very much wanted to watch GH's Carolyn Hennessy on ABC's Cougar Town when it debuted, but because she is no longer watching GH due to her disgust with the show, she literally forgot about it and did not realize she missed it until it was long over.

ABC/Disney and its Board of Directors cannot afford to continue on this path. They cannot continue to ignore and lose the daytime audience. The situation on GH needs to be addressed to bring the long-time fans back so that ratings will increase for both daytime and primetime as well. Successful TV hinges on the audience liking the lead characters on a very basic level and successful soap operas are no different. The current leading females on GH lack likable traits and the leading males are likewise being transformed into characters that few viewers want to connect with. What successful primetime show focuses on characters who started out as murderers or manipulative, lying, con-persons and then suddenly were transformed/redeemed into a hero or heroine? None. Additionally, if the premise is that daytime does not work anymore because it needs to be more like primetime, then wouldn't management actually want to mold it more like primetime? Wouldn't management want to create characters more like those on the successful primetime shows, i.e. those with strong, independent women who are nurses, doctors, judges, or other law enforcement personnel working alongside men with similarly important jobs and skills where the characters compliment one another, not characters that are the same or demeaning to one another in some way? Logically, since these shows are successful, the answer is yes.

The September 10, 2009 episode of 60 Minutes had a spot about CBS' Guiding Light and talked about the dying breed of soaps. Grant Aleksander stated, "There are these great stretches that the audience will grant you. You're allowed to send a child off at the age of 12 and bring them six months later fully grown... They will accept those things. **They won't accept if you take a character and write it in a way that is completely inconsistent with what they have come to accept.**"

This principle is well-known in soap writing. Doug Marland, now considered a soap-writing legend, shared this very idea in his set of rules in what is now considered his classic interview about *How Not to Wreck a Show*. **"Don't change a core character. You can certainly give them edges they didn't have before, or give them a logical reason to change their behavior. But when the audience says, "He would never do that," then you have failed.**" During the past 8-10 months, GH has done just the opposite by having two of the central male leads, Sonny Corinthos and Jason Morgan, along with many of the characters who support or interact in their loosely-woven storylines, undergo 180-degree transformations without explanation. Because the characters have been written inconsistently with regard to their core characteristics and histories, many viewers have become confused, disheartened, disgusted and frustrated. Many have tuned out and sought out other programming or activities.

In addition to making poor artistic decisions, management is dropping the ball when making business decisions. Soaps are now facing more competition from talk shows and reality TV. In an effort to attract new, teen viewers, soaps, including GH, have cast younger actors, but are finding that the number of younger viewers willing to sit for an hour a day is dwindling. Additionally, this portion of the total viewing audience is but a fragment of the total audience; therefore, spending so much time and money courting this age group is reckless and not cost effective.

According to Brooks in the same 60 Minutes spot, "The audience has gotten older. And as the soap operas have attracted more and more 50-plus, 60-plus audience, they've become less attractive to the soap manufacturers." The 35-54 female audience and beyond are often the viewers who have watched for many years and appreciate and watch for character-driven storylines and historical integrity. These are the viewers that, in the past, would often introduce their children and grandchildren to the shows. These are the viewers who are now in the workforce and will spend their income on hair color, medicine, beauty and skin care products and more, not only because they are maturing, but because they want to continue to look and feel their best. Sadly, it is these viewers GH is chasing away by not honoring the characters and the history of the show, which is leading to the downward trend in the ratings and loss of revenue for their sponsors.

Why would management not want to court these mature viewers who would WANT to watch and WANT to spend their money if the shows are written with consistent characterizations and historical integrity? Why ignore this source of revenue?

One could deduce that this dying breed or genre is the victim of self-inflicted causes, not just some victim of the economy or a sign of the times. Susan Lucci noted in her interview on the September 18, 2009

episode of Nightline, which discussed the end of Guiding Light and the state of soaps in general, that “in a bad economy, that is when the audience really wants to watch something that helps them both escape, and is in some ways instructive, and is also really hopeful. And exciting, fun.”

Hope. That is what GH’s current stories lack—a sense of hope. While viewership of GH is dwindling, many viewers still hold out hope that changes will be made. Many imagine GH as a show with real storylines, not just plot-points or stunts, with characters written in a consistent manner, and with true cast integration with favorite and established characters being integral parts of real storylines instead of being relegated to being guests when big events are scheduled. Soaps, including GH, can be viable programs for a network if written well. *In the case of GH, temporary ratings spikes for events or stunts such as Claudia’s car crash or the recent carnival show **that there is an audience with the interest and desire to watch GH consistently if improvements are made.** Unfortunately, these events or stunts have become short-term fixes, much like putting a band-aid on heart surgery. **Instead of being on the bubble of “getting by,” ABC/Disney needs to raise the bar and return GH to being one of the top-rated shows.***

More fans and former viewers of GH are joining together with fans of Sonny and Kate, Jason and Elizabeth, Patrick and Robin, and Jax and Carly as part of the SOS/Save Our Soap! General Hospital Campaign. All share in a common goal of asking ABC/Disney to listen to the viewers by making the changes needed to make GH the quality show it has the potential to be, as well as making it a viable program that ABC/Disney can proudly promote as one of its products! For more information regarding the campaign, contact Dana L. Meyer or Kecia K. Picard at saveoursoapgh@gmail.com, visit the SOS/Save Our Soap! General Hospital page on Facebook, follow on twitter @SOS_GH or visit the SOS/Save Our Soap! General Hospital website at www.saveoursoapgh.com.