



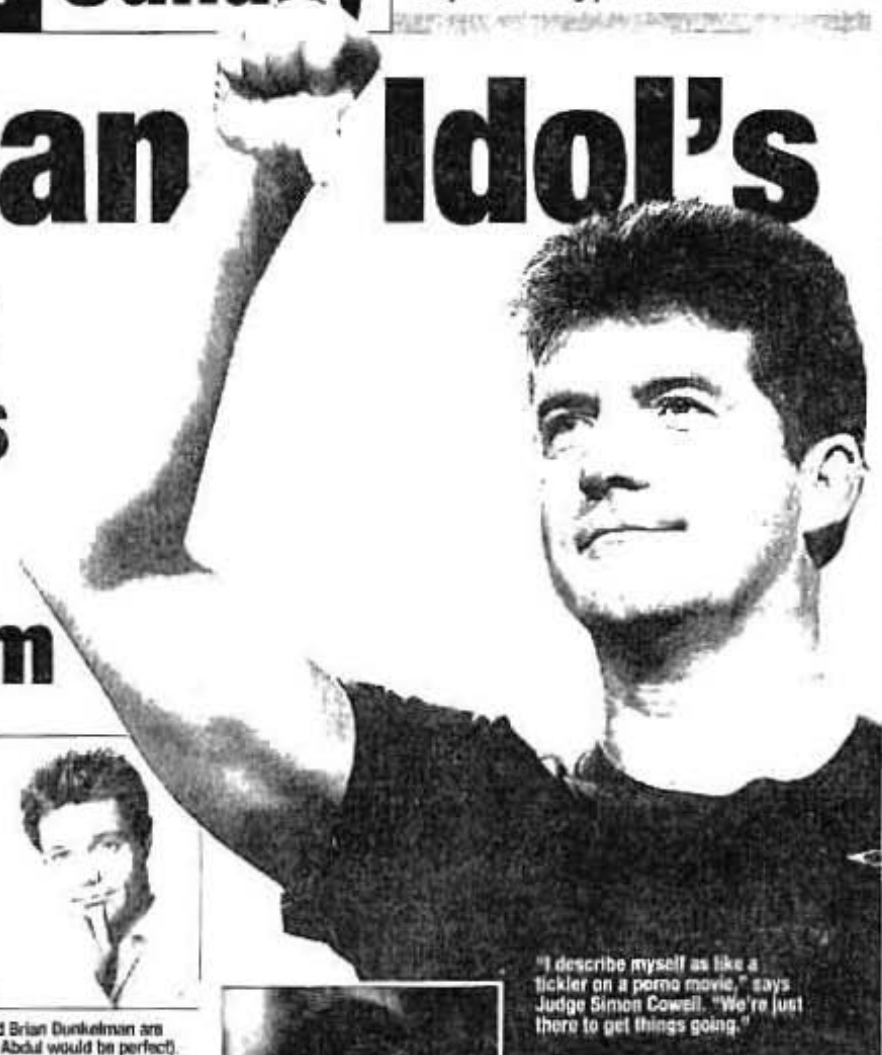
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American Idol's 5 biggest bumbles — and how to fix 'em



"I describe myself as like a tickler on a porno movie," says Judge Simon Cowell. "We're just there to get things going."

FOX'S summer smash "American Idol" demonstrates the importance of staying on top of your game.

Four weeks ago, Justin seemed a shoo-in for the grand prize. Now he's seen as a slick, Vegas wannabe with an arrogant streak. Kelly was the stealth candidate with no sense of fashion and even less personality. Now she looks great, appears the most sincere and is closing in fast on Tamyra.

In response, the "Survivor" meets "Star Search" talent contest has been tweaked a bit and producers admit they have more changes in store for the next edition. But "American Idol" is still making boo-boos.

MICHAEL GILTZ points out six major mistakes the show is making — and how they can be fixed.



Hosts Ryan Seacrest (left) and Brian Dunkelman are considered to be flops (Paula Abdul would be perfect).



Three finalists Kelly, Justin and Tamyra: Why should they all sing the same song for a single?



Brit winner Will Young waited a year to for his CD to be released.

Mistake #1: The judging

Except for the rare comments about Christina's vibrato and breathing technique, there's been precious little constructive criticism. Obviously, viewers don't want to watch a voice lesson, but the judges should get more specific: about singing technique, stage presence, and so on. (How could they let Nikki's godawful costumes get by without comment?)

And does judge Simon Cowell seem a little bored to you, now that all power has passed from the judges to the viewers? "I always describe myself as like a tickler on a porno movie," he says. "We're there to get things going, but once everything starts going there's not much for us to do, really, is there?"

Mistake #2: The hosts

In the UK, the show was hosted by Ant and Dec, two beloved young performers who grew up on television and gave "Pop Idol" just the tone of silliness and (somehow) credibility. The American hosts — Ryan Seacrest and Brian Dunkelman — have been widely considered flops. "I think they've got better," says Cowell, who traded barbs with them in the early stages. "Overall, I'm quite happy with it."

But a quick solution is sitting mere inches away from Cowell. The host for "American Idol" is supposed to be the cheerleader for the contestants, a shoulder for them to cry on. And who better to play that role than Paula Abdul? She should be the host of "American Idol 2."

"That's an interesting thought," says Cowell, who seems surprised and intrigued by the suggestion.

Mistake #3: The single

Right now, the plan is for the top three to record two songs chosen by Simon Cowell and the producers before the finale. Once the winner is named, they'll rush out that version in a matter of weeks. But how can one song be appropriate for, say, Tamyra, Kelly and Justin? His smacks of anonymous pop-star creating, the very boy-band anonymity that is supposed to be over now.

"In a way you are right," admits Cowell. "But what we decided to do was to treat the event a little like the Olympic Games

and choose a song that sums up what the contestants have gone through in this ordeal. It's a great song, a great melody and I think everyone will relate this song to the final show."

Mistake #4: The album

The winner's first (CD) is scheduled to come out before the end of the year. No matter how much you argue about a single being perfect for one and all, surely a few weeks to record an album smacks of slapping it out to capitalize on the show, rather than building a career.

"I don't think there's an easy solution on this," says Cowell. "In America, they're going to go with the second series much, much quicker than the UK series.

So we haven't got that luxury of a year's gap." (In fact, the winner of the UK version — Will Young — isn't coming out with his CD until next month, more than one year after the series aired.)

"But because of the success of the UK series and subsequent record, a lot of the songwriters and producers were immediately excited about the prospect of working with these artists. So what we effectively did is have a number of meetings with the top guys and asked them which artists they wanted to work with. The people who would normally be working with Whitney or Mariah are now working for these artists," says Cowell.

Mistake #5: The format

Solution: Expand the first show to 90 minutes to showcase a half hour of taped segments revealing all the hard work the contestants are doing. Show the song selection, rehearsals and so on.

Watching Justin flub his lines in practice would make the drama of seeing whether he could remember them when performing live all the more exciting. Is Tamyra having trouble hitting a note? Watch viewers exhale as she sails by it.

"You have to make the changes that are necessary rather than changes just for the sake of it," says Cowell. "But there's one thing that will make or break it: Who is turning up at the auditions?"

"If you don't have the right people, you haven't got a show."