

All about the breakout hit of the summer: How it works and who will win...



Simon Cowell (right), Randy Jackson and Paula Abdul (above with a contestant) all talk about the mysterious X Factor.



7 secrets of 'American Idol'

By MICHAEL GLTZ

American Idol — the talent show that's a cross between "Star Search" and "Survivor" — is the biggest hit of the summer.

It airs twice a week — Tuesdays and Wednesdays — on Fox and both editions are in the Top 10. "It's a mindless fun way to spend time in the summer," says Marc Berman, TV ratings guru for the trade magazine Media Week.

So how come those nice-but-bland kids Jim and A.J. made it to the finals? And who's going to win this thing anyway?

Here are seven secrets of TV's latest search for a superstar:

'IDOL' IS NICE: Most reality shows like "Fear Factor" have a nasty tenc. And "Survivor" is downright Darwinian.

But "American Idol" is sweet. Instead of having people call in to eliminate singers, the show has viewers voting (and rooting) for their favorites.

This is smart: not only does it set a positive tone, it lets unusual talent with a core of supporters stay on the air for a few weeks and win over more fans.

"This show actually sort of became the people's show," says judge Simon Cowell, who has been spotting talent for the past 25 years. "They feel involved. They love the dramas that are going on, and they are able to vote for their favorites."

TEENAGE GIRL POWER:

How else to explain the success of baby-faced boys Jim Verraros and A.J. Gil?

Neither one of them was given a chance by the judges and no one expected them to win. (They both looked more stunned than anyone else.) But they're both "boy band" cuts. (A.J. could join Backstreet Boys in a minute.)

And they both seem painfully vulnerable. Jim in particular looked wounded by some of the harsh comments of the judges.

So if you're trying to pick a winner next week, by all means listen to their singing. But also take a minute to press the mute button and ask yourself this question: Who would look great on the next cover of Tiger Beat?

GREEDY SIMON COWELL: Judge Cowell's record label, BMG, will be signing the winner and probably one or two others to recording contracts.

More than anyone else, he wants to see the most talented, most attractive, most worthy person win "American Idol."

That way, he can make oodles of money off of them and — if they get really lucky

— create a genuine superstar who can record hit albums for years to come.

THE X FACTOR: Judges Randy Jackson (a major producer who's worked with the biggest names in the business), Paula Abdul (a huge star in her own right) and Cowell all talk about the "X" factor.

Is it some mysterious formula that only savvy record industry pros can put their finger on? Nah. Just substitute the phrase "sex" factor for the "X" factor and you'll know what they mean.

Now, sexy comes in all shapes and sizes (even Luciano Pavarotti has groupies, you know.)

But if you're wondering how two guys can sing Stevie Wonder's "Ribbon in the Sky" and the judges can say one of them sang it better but the other one deserves to win, just think of the "sex" factor and you'll know what they're thinking.

THE COWELL FACTOR: Like we said, Cowell just wants the most talented person to win, and of course his comments are almost always on target. (After hearing Abdul soft-soap even the most hapless performance, viewers would grow quickly tired of "American Idol" if Cowell didn't step in to bring an air of reality to this reality show.)

But his opposition to a performer can give them the edge they need. When Cowell dismissed Jim Verraros, the kid's

teary response was surely a factor in why viewers voted for him.

But Jim needs to deliver a great performance his next time up so viewers can feel proud of supporting him rather than having to admit Cowell was right.

THINK PINK: Gay people have shown a surprising dominance on reality shows: Richard Hatch won the first and best "Survivor," Will Young won the British version of "American Idol" and promptly came out; the biggest stars to emerge from MTV's "The Real World" were often gay or bisexual; and for a while they popped up more frequently on "Who Wants to be a Millionaire" than on "Will & Grace."

So don't be surprised if the winner is very grateful to the teenage girls that vote for him but distinctly unavailable.

AND THE WINNER IS . . .



Justin: Not cocky

she had to collect herself after one of his savior turns.)

The only problem?

Justin needs to face some obstacles. If he keeps coasting to victory, viewers might start to root for a come-from-behind performer who doesn't have it so easy. (That's exactly what happened in the UK.)

Message to Justin: try and get on Cowell's bad side.