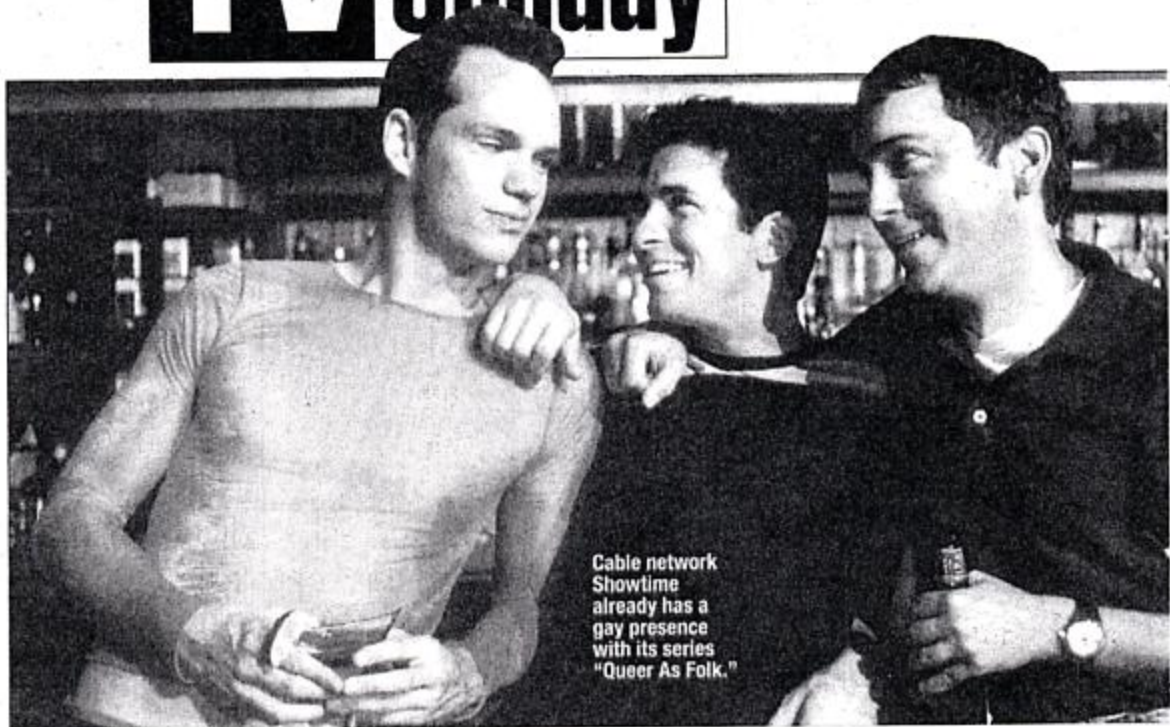


MTV and Showtime have joint plans to chase the 'pink dollar' with a new cable channel, but...



Cable network Showtime already has a gay presence with its series "Queer As Folk."

Will gay pay?

By MICHAEL GILTZ

MTV and Showtime have made it official: the two Viacom owned companies will be uniting in a civil ceremony and raising their very own gay cable channel.

"This is obviously a great opportunity for me," jokes Michael Musto, columnist for the Village Voice, host of Metro's "New York Central" and regular on E!'s "The Gossip Show." Musto is ready to sign up as a subscriber and as on-air talent, ideally as a game show host. "It could be a gay 'Supermarket Sweep.' In Chelsea. At the Raymond Dragon store."

But the details of the proposed channel are sketchy. Will it be called QTV? When will it launch? Will it air reruns of "Rhoda" and "The Odd Couple"?

After the other jokes — finally, a home for old episodes of "MTV's House of Style!" — certain points are clear: It was only a matter of time before someone with deep pockets launched a gay cable channel, there's strong support for the concept from the gay community, and it's going to be trickier (and more expensive) than you might imagine to make such a channel succeed.

"We're aggressively doing development and planning," says Matt Farber, the former MTV executive of 10 years who came back to his alma mater with this brainchild.

When they discovered Gene Falk, the senior vp of Showtime's digital media group was workshopping the same idea, they combined forces. Falk has suggested you could see a launch sometime in 2003 of the hybrid pay channel with some advertising (think HBO with sponsored shows a la PBS).

"I don't know if there's ever been any-

thing developed on a 10-year horizon," says the 39-year-old Farber, "so it won't take forever."

It seems like it's taken forever to Scott Seomin, the entertainment media director for the Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD).



The Metro channel's Michael Musto would like to see "a gay version of everything that's been done straight. A gay game show...a totally gay soap opera."

"My first reaction was, 'It's about time,'" says Seomin. "This seems like it's going to happen, whereas in the past it always seemed like a pipe dream."

Scott Seitz of Spare Parts, a company that helps advertisers market their wares to the gay community, says, "It's a great sign of the strength of the market."

That market — which Farber describes as \$350 billion strong and reflects a minority others peg as perhaps six percent of the population — is going to demand high quality programming, according to Tim Brooks, senior vp of research at Lifetime and the co-author of "The Complete Directory to Primetime Network and Cable TV Shows."

"To have substantial appeal," says Brooks, "a gay channel would have to

have some kind of dramatic programming, and those are fairly expensive to produce."

Certainly the reward would be sweet. Black Entertainment Television (BET) recently sold to Viacom for \$3 billion. Telemundo — the number two Hispanic channel behind Univision — just sold to NBC for \$2.7 billion.

With a pot of gold like that at the end of the rainbow, it might be possible to tackle a lot of the programming ideas that spring to Seomin's mind.

"I'd like to see a gay talk show, a 'Will & Grace' sort of show with a gay man and his female best friend," says Seomin of GLAAD. "And I would love to see an all-gay 'Real World' with a token straight guy and make the gay guys try and figure him out."

Musto agrees. "Really, I'd like to see a gay version of everything that's been done straight," says Musto. "A gay game show, though it would be hard to top Bruce Vilanch on 'Hollywood Squares' for pure gay visibility. A totally gay soap opera. Oh wait, we already have 'Queer as Folk.' Okay, maybe it's not such a good idea."

He's joking, but it does point up a problem. Any gay cable channel will be competing with the increasing gay presence on the major networks and throughout the cable universe — from NBC's "Will & Grace" to HBO's "Six Feet Under." If a terrific gay talent emerged who wanted to launch a talk show, chances are they could go up against Regis or Maury without any great fuss from advertisers and with a much bigger payday if it works.

Being inclusive will be the final challenge. A gay cable channel can't be all things to all people, just as BET can't appeal to every segment of the black com-

munity. But is there a cohesive gay community large enough to support a channel like this? Brooks of Lifetime says that will be the deciding factor.

"One of the great unanswered questions is whether the gay community has enough sense of community to support something of their own, or whether it's too diverse," he says.

Seomin sees that diversity as a strength — and as a source for many different types of shows.

"I know there are going to be some people in the gay community who won't like the programming," agrees Seomin. "But not all women like all the programming on Lifetime. It's the beauty of our community; we're very diverse. What's going to be great about a 24-hour gay cable channel is that hopefully there's going to be something for every gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered person."

It must be a good idea. The MTV/Showtime channel may not have a name or an official start date, but it does already have one thing: competition.

Tomorrow, the upstart company MDC will officially announce its own plans for a gay cable channel. Called Alt1-TV, it plans to be a basic cable, advertiser-supported channel.

"We're in the process of doing a roadshow for our investors," says David McKillopp, a veteran of the Discovery Channel who worked on Emmy nominated programming for that channel. He founded MDC with Michael Airington (formerly of Saban Entertainment) and Chance Mitchell.

Though Alt1-TV doesn't have any deep-pocketed investors yet, it has been meeting with cable operators and offering the lure of a non-controversial gay channel targeted for the digital tiers available in 22 million homes.