

# Sunday TV

# What women watch (when men aren't around)

Lifetime's dramas are guilty pleasures dangled in front of its audience — and they can't resist

By MICHAEL GILTZ

**L**IFETIME has enjoyed a flurry of good news lately. Its Sunday night lineup of shows — "Any Day Now," "Strong Medicine" and "The Division" — are the top three dramas on basic cable.

Lifetime's ratings have gone up every month for 19 consecutive months now — a remarkable run for a cable channel that's been around for 17 years.

And, best of all, Lifetime is the number one basic cable channel in prime time.

But behind those raw numbers is a unique story of how a niche programmer triumphed over channels with mass appeal like TBS and USA.

It involves original programming, a potential villain/competitor called Oxygen and going for bigger ratings by narrowing their focus.

Think of it as a triumph over adversity that would make a good plot for a TV movie — on Lifetime, of course.

"They have come into their own," says Guy McCarter, the director of entertainment marketing at ad agency OMD USA. "A positive sign for them and even the industry is that their investment in original programming is what has taken them to the top."

When Lifetime CEO Carole Black joined the channel two years ago, it spent about \$100 million on original programming. That's doubled to \$200 million today. It's also been money spent wisely — albeit with a



Lifetime's 100th movie, "Midwives," airs next month and stars Oscar winner Sissy Spacek (front).

serious roll of the dice. "Our programming people developed those shows and 'Any Day Now' was there before I came in," says Black. "We realized then that we could build a block, possibly. It was very tough, because we were taking out our strongest movie night on Sunday and that's a

real risk to take." Remarkably, Lifetime has flourished with the very first three dramas it put on the air. "We've only done three drama pilots," says Black. "We picked up all three of them, and they're the number one, two and three top-rated original dramas on basic cable."

Even more extraordinary, according to Lifetime's senior vice president of research Tim Brooks, is that the channel rose to the top by focusing more tightly than ever on its target audience of women.

"Normally, that happens because you broaden your appeal and bring more and different kinds of people in," explains Brooks. "But in our case, we've actually narrowed our appeal."

"Our audience is more female skewed now than it was five years ago. It used to be 70-30, female to male; now it's 80-20."

Why this surge in original programming? Lifetime downplays it, of course, but the nascent threat of the new female-focused cable channel Oxygen gave it a good swift kick in the pants.

Announced a few months before Black joined Lifetime, Oxygen features industry heavyweights like Oprah Winfrey and Geraldine Laybourne, who masterminded Nickelodeon.

But Oxygen is struggling: To date, it's only in about 12 million homes compared to Lifetime's 79 million. And since Oxygen isn't carried in



**DRAMA QUEENS:** Lifetime now spends \$200 million on original programming, including its Sunday night lineup of shows "Any Day Now" (left), "Strong Medicine" (below) and "The Division" (bottom). The shows are the top three dramas on basic cable.



New York City, it's practically invisible to Madison Avenue.

But putting the fear of God into Lifetime was probably the best thing that happened to them.

"Lifetime was kind of cruising along," says McCarter of OMD USA, saying it was perceived as doing low rent, women-in-distress TV movies while taking its audience for granted.

Black correctly points out that Lifetime also has competition from a lot of other channels like The Food Network, E! and HGTV — channels that don't claim to focus on women but clearly go after a huge chunk of the same audience. But she also agrees that Oxygen's appearance helped them in unexpected ways.

"Some of the most incredible and talented women in the business came together on Oxygen," says Black. "It was such a huge story that it necessitated reporters who are fair to always call us when they were doing a story. We got a lot of press attention and it was enormously helpful."

The story Lifetime can tell continues to get better. Its movies — after an unfortunate foray into more generic territory — have returned to the "women triumphing over adversity" formula that made them distinctive, albeit at a higher level of quality.

Lifetime's 100th movie, airing in April, is based on the bestseller "Midwives" and stars Oscar winner Sissy Spacek.

But for all that, Lifetime's secret weapon is that it's the female version of ESPN's "SportsCenter" — a guilty-pleasure-of-a-channel that women turn on to veg out while a TV movie heroine grapples with a husband who's cheating/terminally ill/abusive/gay or who simply enjoy Bonnie Bedalia on "The Division" deal sternly with her handsome young lover.

"Sometimes it's the only treat they give themselves all week," admits Black. "They tell us we're a respite for them. It's a place they go where they can just relax, enjoy and feel an emotional connection."