VSunday

By MICHAEL GILTZ

HE new fall season ar rived with the usual assortment of randy teens, violent dramas, and young singles on the make. But the latest trend in programming has network executives scrambling to dust off their knowledge of "Leave It To Beaver" and

Yes, the wholesome family show is back.

There's no question family shows are on the rise again, says Martha Williamson, the creator of the long-running smash Touched By An Angel." The bottom line is that always will networks respect success.

Sure, Fox's bleep-filled "Action" got lots of press and great reviews. But it's going to take a lot of patience to see whether it can get lots of viewers.

There's often a big divergence between what the creative community thinks is hip and cool and what people actually want to watch, points out Tim Brooks, an exectutive at USA Networks and the co-

author of The Complete Directory to Prime Time Network and Cable TV

Network executives are slowly realizing this, along with the simple fact that they can't out-curse cable. The one thing they can do better is deliver a mass audience. And the best way to deliver a wide audience to program widely appealing shows.

That's why every network is racing to develop family sitcoms a la "The Cosby Show" and family dramas a la "The Waltons" later this season and fall 2000. It's no surprise they're all jumping on the latest bandwagon. But what is surprising is that they didn't see the signs earlier.

The WB is one of the most profitable profitable networks, thanks to its laser-like focus on teens and oodles of press for sexy soaps like "Dawson's Creek" and

"Felicity."

So what's the WB's No.
I show? Squeaky clean

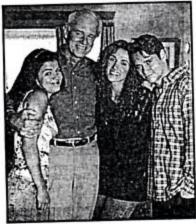
7th Heaven," which is about a man of the cloth and his happy brood.

CBS is back on top as the network with the most viewers and even attracted some of the precious 18-34 year old demographic to its best reviewed new show, Friday's "Now and Friday's Again.

The Eye network's No. 1 drama? The wholesome "Touched By An Angel." And its No. 1 sitcom? Loves "Everybody Raymond."

"It's not about the kids," star Ray Romano insists -

Here's a radical idea: Make wholesome programs — without stupid sex jokes — that a lotta people want to watch. Believe it or not, the networks are beginning to catch on...



"Providence" (left), a very un-NBC type show, is the network's biggest hit in years. Right: Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?" host Regis Philbin (left) says, *Families are getting together to watch television again!"



and that's true. But there are a lot less embarrassing questions for parents to watching answer watching "Raymond" than on your Friends." of average

Speaking of Friends," NBC is still highly profitable, but had a disastrous pilot season where it was unable to churn out enough new urban, singles-on-themake sitcoms to replace

collapsing series like "Suddenly Susan" and "Veronica's Closet." What's the biggest hit it's launched in years?
"Providence," a very unNBC type show that
caught the network by sur-

prise when it caught fire

be made to feel unappreci-Allen felt for years. A clearer example of television's indifference to fam-

with viewers. The femaleskewing drama comes complete with cute kids, lots of pets and Mike Farrell of "M'A'S'H" for the older

folk ABC desperately wants to find a replacement for "Home Improvement," a show that star Tim Allen has repeatedly pointed out (without rancor) was never a favorite with network executives.

It's astonishing to think a network's No. 1 show could ated, but that's exactly how

ily programming — even when it succeeds — would

xecutives scratched their heads trying to figure out its populari-Were people hungering more game shows? Maybe, because any time a genre is not on the air it's ripe for renewal. But host Regis Philbin was probably closer to the truth when he crowed, "Families are getting together to watch tele

be harder to find. ABC is

still looking for that "Improvement"-like smash,

but out of left field came

another runaway hit: the

ready-for-prime-time game show "Who Wants to Be a

scratched

Millionaire?"

vision again! Heck, there's even PAX, an entire network devoted to family friendly programming like "Chicken Soup for the Soul" and reruns of stalwarts like Touched By An Angel and "Diagnosis Murder."

Despite all this evidence and their need for broadbased hits, networks aren't excited about brushing up on their golly gees. Producers complain that "soft" family shows that networks fear will be hard to promote don't always get

a fair hearing. Everybody's always look ing to push the envelope and find the next, unseen miracle, admits 'Angel's' Williamson. The problem isn't just with the net-

"Most young writers like