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Its site now focuses on enabling communities of fans to gab about and share clips of its shows.

By Dawn C. Chmielewski, Los Angeles Times Staff Writer
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"Swingtown" is a CBS television show, scheduled for midseason, about partner-swapping couples.

It's also what CBS executives lightheartedly call their new Internet strategy. The idea is to let their online material be promiscuous: Instead of limiting their shows and other online video to CBS.com, the network is letting them couple with any website that people might visit.

"CBS is all about open, nonexclusive, multiple partnerships," said Quincy Smith, president of CBS Interactive.

Like other broadcast TV networks, CBS is trying to find its way in the digital world.

Last spring, a day after presenting their fall television lineup to advertisers at Carnegie Hall, a group of CBS managers headed for a place far from the opulence and stuffy tradition of the New York concert hall: Silicon Valley.

In search of Web know-how, they met with 16 next-generation Internet companies in Palo Alto to discuss what traditional media could learn from emerging media about engaging people online.

Some of the network's findings are reflected on its revamped home page.

Until recently, CBS.com had consisted of what one CBS executive

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described as "regurgitated television" -- full-length streams of shows and scheduling information.

The new, less cluttered website, launched in tandem with the fall season, focuses on attracting communities of fans who want to gab about such CBS shows as "How I Met Your Mother" or "Kid Nation."

It devotes less space to TV Guide-like programming information and instead provides a forum where viewers can express their views -- good and bad -- about shows.

"The key lesson from Silicon Valley is respect for the audience," said Jonathan Barzilay, senior vice president and general manager of entertainment at CBS Interactive.

But the approach also includes that "Swingtown" element: CBS offers software to let fans of shows such as "Jericho" get production updates, photos, exclusive video and insider commentary, then post them on blogs and social-networking sites such as Facebook and MySpace.

The redesign is another step in the digital metamorphosis of CBS that's being led by Smith, a former investment banker who took charge of CBS Interactive in November. He took on the task of overhauling CBS' digital strategy despite the network's reputation as catering to older viewers.

Since Smith joined, CBS has acquired Wallstrip, a humorous video blog about investing, and Last.FM, an online radio site. In April it launched the CBS Audience Network, which distributes full streamed episodes of shows and clips to more than 100 websites, including AOL, Veoh and TV.com.

He also is moving away from earlier strategies designed to bring people to CBS.com, such as the Innertube online service, which offers full streams of prime-time shows, clips and Web-only videos.

With the Audience Network, Smith's strategy could be described more as "outertube." The idea is to send CBS shows to other websites where people are already hanging out, to ensure that viewers don't have to go far to find them.

The retooled website may flout the approach of old-school TV marketers, who Smith said would "berate me with e-mails" for failing to display scheduling information for a show that is already airing. Instead, it seeks to emulate Bay Area darlings such as social network Facebook and democratically controlled news site Digg, which have attracted millions of devotees.

"Think: community, community, community, plus water cooler," Smith said.

Other TV networks also are making digital moves. For example, NBC Universal, which has snapped up iVillage and other websites recently, launched Wednesday an online service for downloading free episodes of shows such as "Heroes" and "The Office." The shows feature ads that can't be skipped.

There's no guarantee that the CBS overhaul will attract more Web surfers. CBS.com and the websites of other broadcast TV networks trail far behind such Internet giants as Yahoo Inc., Time Warner Inc.'s AOL and Microsoft Corp.'s MSN.

CBS.com attracted more than 6 million U.S. visitors in August, about the same as the websites of its broadcast TV peers, according to ComScore Media Metrix. But their traffic was dwarfed by the 135 million people who visited Yahoo, the top Internet property, during the month.

That's one reason why CBS is spreading its programming to other websites. For its "Big Brother 8" reality show this summer, CBS offered photos, participants' diaries, show recaps and full episodes on its website. But it also created software, known as a widget, to let fans post those

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things on their own blogs, computer desktops or Facebook and MySpace pages.

The network says that about 25% of the interaction with that programming happened somewhere other than CBS.com.

When "Kid Nation" debuted Wednesday, viewers could go to CBS.com and weigh in on the debate raging about the show ("Lord of the Flies" redux or innovative reality show?). They also could watch original short-form videos produced by the newly formed CBS iLab online programming unit, such as "100 Reasons to Love Jericho." The videos are designed to showcase programs, Smith said, "but not in a way that is as obvious as if watching on TV."

Forrester Research analyst Josh Bernoff said CBS' new approach recognized that TV shows are social -- fans talk about shows, so the key for networks is to make sure that conversation happens on their websites.

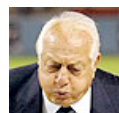

"It takes an awful lot of humility to recognize that it's better to distribute the stuff off your site than to try to attract people to it," Bernoff said. "That means if the viewer community wants to talk about it somewhere else, let them take it somewhere else."

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