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Fox Mulls How to Exploit the Mojo of 'American Idol'

By **BILL CARTER**

More than 38 million people watched Ruben Studdard narrowly outpoll Clay Aiken for a million-dollar recording contract Wednesday night during the finale of the hit Fox talent series "American Idol," making it the second-most-popular entertainment show on television this year.

But the tremendous success of the show also raises challenging questions for the Fox network: Does a phenomenon built on new artists singing mainly middle-of-the-road pop songs of the 60's and 70's have staying power? And, having stuffed its schedule with "American Idol" to help it win the May ratings war, and spinning off a version with younger contestants, is Fox following the same ill-fated path of oversaturation that ABC took three years ago with the game show "Who Wants to Be a Millionaire"?

Executives of Fox, a unit of the [News Corporation](#), dismiss any such worries. And right now the popularity of "American Idol" appears only to be growing. The only shows with bigger audiences this year were the Super Bowl and the finale of another Fox reality show, "Joe Millionaire." "American Idol" improved by more than 50 percent in every ratings measure over its first season, which ended in September. The series that just ended averaged 21.7 million total viewers, compared with 12.7 million for the first edition.

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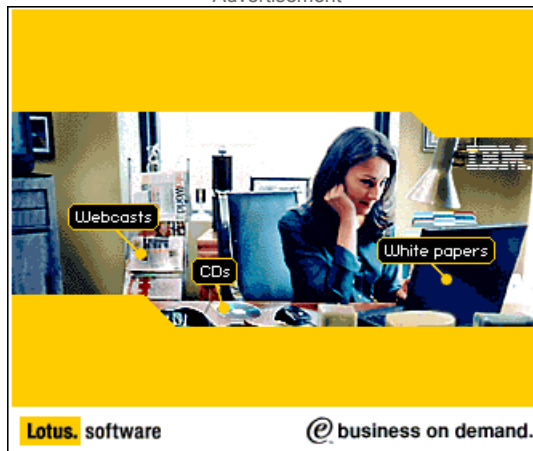
Ruben Studdard, left, the winner of "American Idol," with last season's winner, Kelly Clarkson, and this season's runner-up, Clay Aiken.

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"American Idol" was also primarily responsible for pushing Fox past NBC to win the May ratings sweep competition among 18- to 49-year-old viewers, the benchmark used by every network except CBS.

Fox sprinkled the show like fairy dust all over its schedule this month. While the first season lasted a total of 22.5 hours, this latest one totaled almost 39 hours. Some television industry executives are now predicting that Fox, determined to win the yearlong ratings race for the first time, will use "American Idol" as many times as it takes to ensure victory.

Several executives who have knowledge of discussions between Fox and the show's producers said the network planned to schedule at least 40 hours of "American Idol" between January and next May. Gail Berman, the president of Fox Entertainment, denied that, saying the network would not use the show that much. She also pointed out that Fox would "let the series hibernate" until January, despite pleas from some fans to bring it back sooner.

Still, in two weeks, Fox will introduce for a summer run a similar show, "American Juniors," featuring child singers, and it plans to use that series in the fall, as well. The network also has in development "Second Chances," which would bring back singers considered one-hit wonders for a talent contest.

One executive with ties to "American Idol" made the ominous comment, "The show is ratings crack for Fox; they can't help themselves." The "crack" comparison is exactly the same one used by the chairman of Fox Entertainment, Sandy Grushow, against ABC when it was expanding "Millionaire" wantonly all over its schedule.

Ms. Berman called such comparisons the desperate comments of competitors, "who are thinking, 'How could they have it and we not have it?'" She noted that Fox had "used the show very strategically," funneling its big audience into several promising series, including the drama "24" and the comedy "The Bernie Mac Show." Both series gained millions of viewers thanks to the time slots following "American Idol."

But the show's reliance on a brand of pop music some find stale could turn off younger music fans. The finale on Wednesday included songs made popular by Olivia Newton-John, Neil Sedaka and Lionel Richie, not a roster of singers with large followings among younger music fans.



Vince Bucci/Getty Images

The "American Idol" finale on Fox Wednesday night drew 38 million viewers, who learned that Ruben

Studdard was the winner.

American Hit

"American Idol" has become an even bigger hit for Fox in its second season.

VIEWERSHIP

Average per show, in millions



Total for final episode, in millions



ADVERTISING RATE

Average price for a 30-second commercial



Sources: Nielsen Media Research; Nielsen Monitor-Plus

The New York Times

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"There is already a contingent of young viewers who are very anti the show," said Brian Graden, the president of entertainment at MTV. "But it's not a significant factor at this point. So far it's cool to watch as long as you say up front that it's cheesy. That protects you."

Craig Marks, the editor of Blender, a music magazine, said he personally loved the show, but added: "The music on the show is hollow; it's essentially awful. People who enjoy the show would never buy the records. It's just very wholesome. It has no edge whatsoever. It's edge-free music."

Even Mr. Studdard, who beat out Mr. Aiken by 135,000 votes out of a total of more than 24 million, displayed some of the limitations of the show, Mr. Marks said. "When he sang 'Imagine,' it was just a terrible performance; he totally mangled it." As for Mr. Aiken he said, "He is totally out of Broadway." (Fox executives said yesterday that the show's host, Ryan Seacrest, had read the figures wrong when he announced that Mr. Studdard had won by only 1,335 votes.)

The risk for the show, Mr. Marks said, is that because it needs to appeal to such a wide audience it has to weed out any performers who are not blandly acceptable. The saving grace, he said, is the show's comically outspoken judge Simon Cowell. "The show would collapse under the weight of its kisses and platitudes if not for him," Mr. Marks said. "You can see that he sits there some nights desperate to add a little rock energy to the stage."

Joe Levy, the assistant managing editor for music at Rolling Stone, said the show owed its bland pop sensibility to its roots as a British production. "The British charts are always full of treacly pop music," he said.

And Mr. Levy pointed out that as much as some music fans want to eradicate what he called the "teen pop trend," as personified in stars like Britney Spears and the Backstreet Boys, the genre seems to be hitting what he called "a second wave." The proof, he said, was the hit album now out from Hilary Duff, the teenage star of the Lizzie McGuire series on the Disney Channel, and the success of "Thankful," the album by Kelly Clarkson, who won the first "Idol," which reached No. 1 its first week in release.

"Even if the teenage boy who loves the show now thinks it gets old soon, he has a little sister who's ready to decide it's cute," Mr. Levy said.

Ms. Berman of Fox said she was not worried about any fallout from

moves...

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the show being too mainstream. "I'll take that criticism every day of the week," she said. Although Ms. Berman said the show must "continue to make improvements," do not expect "American Idol" to change very much. An audience of nearly 40 million viewers always tells a network not to fiddle with success.

"I did not believe it was possible that any show could have an appeal this broad," Ms. Berman said. "So far there's no evidence that its popularity is fading. I think the show will be a long-term hit."



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