

Susanne Schosser

# Television: the medium to start active learning

**Television is not only able to provide children with explanations but can also stimulate young viewers to join in and imitate what is going on. Super RTL programmes such as *Blue's Clues* and *Art Attack* illustrate how such programmes can achieve successful ratings.**

Super RTL has established itself over the past few years as the children's favourite channel in Germany. Since February 1998 we have been the clear market leader in the 3- to 13-year-olds' age-group segment. In my opinion, our ability to distance the field is explained by the care we have taken to cater for our child viewers' needs and wishes. Needless to say, it is necessary to identify the latter before they can be fulfilled. A number of programmes are excellent also from the adults'

perspective. They provide knowledge and fun at the same time. Now, if you read the previous sentence without beginning to wonder, you have fallen right into the trap! Many formats are based on this very model. They impart knowledge and they are also funny (in the ideal case). And yet children do not accept such programmes. They are quick to notice the raised finger in the background and react accordingly: they simply switch off. Our goal is to entertain children. Imparting knowledge at Super RTL *must* be fun for the children.

It is, however, essential to take the children's (age and gender) differences into account, the child audience being extremely heterogeneous. What captures the 12-year-olds' interest is not necessarily suitable for 3- to 5-year-olds. I would like to present three formats that appeal to children in completely different ways: *Disney's Art Attack*, *WOW Die Entdeckerzone* (*WOW The Discoverers' Zone*) and *Blue's Clues – Blau und schlau* (*Blue's Clues – Blue and Wily*).

## *Disney's Art Attack*

Anyone can become a great artist. This is the motto *Art Attack* adheres to in its firework display of brilliant ideas. These ideas are intended to fuel the children's creativity. *Disney's Art Attack* has been broadcast on Super RTL since 1998 and ranks among the most successful programmes to promote creative activities among children. Even by our standards conquering a children's market share of up to 55% with a range of as many as

530,000 children is quite an astonishing achievement. The large number of adult viewers proves that well-designed children's television can also be attractive for a mass audience.

But how does *Disney's Art Attack* with its tips and ideas on arts and crafts promote artistic activity in over a million viewers? In my opinion, *Disney's Art Attack* does exactly the opposite of what one would expect of a smug, traditional "arts and crafts programme": *Art Attack* lives on its "surprise effect". Consider the title of the programme, which ingeniously combines art with the idea of "action": hence our decision to retain the English name, as this effect would have been lost in German.

The next clue is the fantastic studio decor, consisting of huge coloured crayons, loud colours, palettes, tools and paintbrushes. The setting arouses the viewer's curiosity and enthusiasm, paying tribute to a significant didactic principle: the learning environment has to be stimulating. In each episode a colossal fantasy picture is created from clothing, bank notes, books and other everyday items. While the picture is taking shape, the viewer is invited to join in the guessing game as to what the picture will represent. I find it quite remarkable that the final products are not the common-or-garden beetles, in Germany usually cockchafers, or ladybirds made from cheese-spread boxes or giraffes made from chestnuts. Everyday objects – from washing powder, leaves, or old newspapers – are used to create ingenious works of art that none of the viewers would ever have dreamt they were capable of.



*Disney's Art Attack*

Children without any imagination do not exist: they are just waiting to be encouraged. *Disney's Art Attack* helps children to release undreamt-of creative energy, to overcome the emotional "I can't do it" blockade. The programme features just the right blend of thick-and-fast entertainment and humour. The parts intended for imitation are easy for the children to comprehend; interesting techniques are used to repeat necessary instructions. *Art Attack* is exciting; it captures the attention of both the children who sit back and watch and those who immediately join in the activities offered. To judge by the findings of private field research projects and the enormous response, the creative viewers are in the clear majority.

#### *WOW The Discoverers' Zone*

The co-production *WOW* is the only experiment series on German television to encourage children to carry out experiments by themselves. Since its launch in April 2004 at Super RTL the programme has conquered a market share of up to 37%, a highly impressive rating for an information programme. The leitmotiv of the *WOW* concept is to introduce children to scientific issues step by step, drawing on themes from their everyday lives. In *WOW* children are the protagonists. In entertaining film inserts, they discover physical, chemical and biological phenomena underlying daily events. Their curiosity is raised as a result and they begin to experiment:

- Why does the sound of a car engine change as it drives past? Children imitate the phenomenon, swinging a bleeping stop-watch attached to a piece of cord. This is the model *WOW* uses to demonstrate the Doppler effect.
- A boy drops a raw egg on the floor. How can a raw egg be prevented from breaking so easily? The children put an egg into vinegar. The fragile shell becomes elastic as a result.

- A young girl pours sugar into a glass brimful of water. Why doesn't the water flow over the brim? The children learn that the sugar "hides" in the molecular cavities in the water.

During these processes the children remain within their everyday environment and experiment with normal household objects. Sometimes their smaller brothers and sisters get on their nerves when they want to continue with their homework. *WOW* also shows children at home in South Africa and Alaska to provide an appropriate setting for experiments in heat and snow.

The scientific information is not packed and then presented to the children but stems from the direct environment of the children. This makes it possible for the programme to elucidate complex relationships. Since the children understand why they require the knowledge imparted and are intrigued to discover the background to this knowledge, they remain mentally fit and "on the ball", as it were. The *WOW* concept thus arouses and stills the children's natural curiosity. *WOW* offers a wide variety of subjects in each episode to sustain the viewers' interest for a full 30 minutes. There is something for everyone: for boys and girls, younger and older. About ten experiments are carried out in each programme, with time to recapitulate and assimilate. The individual items in which the children pursue many activities are presented by Nina Moghaddam and Marcus Werner. The role of the latter comprises a variety of functions:

- Complicated contents are repeated: "Right, what do we need for this experiment? A bucket, a small



*WOW The Discoverers' Zone*

plastic bowl, plastic foil, some gravel and water." Several experiments are repeated in the television studio.

- Selected themes are explained in more depth by the presenters: "Now we know what we can taste with our tongue. But without our nose tasting's no fun. Look at this..."
- The scientific background is then explained competently by adults (off-screen or in the studio); the children on set play an independent role, however, so they do not come across as super-intelligent high-flyers to their peers watching.
- The presenters provide the viewers with figures they can identify with; they address the children directly, not forgetting touches of humour. They ask themselves typical questions that would occur to the viewers in the process, encouraging them to carry out the experiments at home.

*WOW The Discoverers' Zone* provides children with the opportunity to learn the way they find easiest: the programme raises questions that whet the children's curiosity and delivers skilfully devised answers. As children carry out the experiments, the young viewers soon grasp that they can easily copy them.

#### *Blue's Clues – Blue and Wily*

Our pre-school block *TOGGOLINO* caters for the needs of our youngest generation of television viewers,



*Blue's Clues – Blue and Wily*

offering highly imaginative programmes designed to carefully guide the children to the medium of television. In 2003 we introduced a completely new pre-school format in Germany, *Blue's Clues – Blue and Wily*, featuring innovative, interactive and consistent items based on the pedagogically meaningful principle of repetition. The series, which now runs in over 60 countries, is watched every week by over four million young viewers in the US alone. In Germany our programme *Blue's Clues* reaches on average an almost 50 % share of the 3- to 13-year-olds' market. Young children love repetition. This is the discovery ascribed to by *Blue's Clues*, a series that has already been awarded a number of significant prizes, including the *Prix Jeunesse Award* and on two occasions the *Television Critics' Award for Outstanding Children's Show*.

The host of this innovative programme for preschoolers is Steve. A world is created around his person that reminds children of their own home and at the same time offers them sufficient surprises to sustain their excitement and their power of imagination. Together with his little

dog Blue Steve plays a game called "Blue and Wily": Blue leaves a blue pawprint on three objects. Steve has to find these clues – with the help of his friends, who include the children sitting in front of the television at home –, jot them down in his notebook and find out what Blue is trying to tell him with these unusual messages. The advantages of this interactive approach are self-evident. If the children at home shout to Steve the same solution as their invisible peers, they are filled with pride and consequently feel affirmed. One of the key benefits is that the children's learning is reinforced every day by repeats, each episode being rebroadcast on the next six days. *Blue's Clues* was developed by experienced education experts. Working on each episode for ten months, they are not satisfied until Blue's latest adventure meets the standards set by teachers and parents and passes the test of the preschool audience. They have succeeded in creating a series in which children feel at ease and accepted, where children can learn a vast amount. Some astonishing facts have been revealed by studies on the subject: after only one month of

regular viewing and guessing with the others in the programme, *Blue's Clues* fans performed significantly better in various tests than children who had not watched the series.

What do children learn in *Blue's Clues*? When they try to find out the message Blue seeks to convey with her pawprints, they train their ability to think logically, to deploy quickly their powers of deduction and to come up with solutions. What do you get if you put a bird and a house together? That's right, a birdhouse. What's the name of the room where you normally find a spoon? Exactly, a kitchen. And then Steve has to leave directly to find Blue's next clue. In the process the children learn a number of other things that are important for life. In one episode, Tickety Tack and his friends, for example, make sure that in a good 20 minutes the youngsters learn a considerable amount of material on the phenomenon of time. In another episode, the inquisitive audience discovers which spices are added to a meal. Thanks to *Blue's Clues* learning is literally child's play, for example, counting, painting and classifying objects. In addition, *Blue's Clues* enhances the viewers' social competence, propagating important values such as friendship, team work and the readiness to help others. Blue is sad. What can we do to cheer her up? Steve plays "Blue and Wily": team-work is the only way for us to solve problems! ■

Translated by John Malcolm King

#### THE AUTHOR

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