

TV One to challenge BET for an audience

NEW YORK (AP) - Jonathan Rodgers will tell anyone who listens that his new TV network aimed at black adults is not, repeat NOT, trying to compete with BET.

Not everyone is buying the pitch — certainly not the Black Entertainment Network. But Rodgers' ability to say that with a straight face speaks volumes about what BET has become and the glimmer of hope that offers to others trying to infringe on its turf.

TV One, a partnership between the popular Radio One network and the Comcast cable company, is planning to launch next year with a focus on blacks aged 25 to 54 who feel disenfranchised by BET's emphasis on youth.

Rodgers, TV One's president and the former head of Discovery, is trying to sell the service now to cable and satellite operators.

While BET is heavy on hip-hop, TV One will start with rerun comedies and dramas. TV One will also be heavy with the type of non-fiction programming the Dis-

covery networks have made popular — stories about dating, decorating, weddings and births — focusing on black participants.

"It's not us or BET," Rodgers said. "The African-American marketplace has been so underserved. Why should we have only one channel? And if there are two channels, that they have to be competitors?"

According to a recent study by the ad-buying firm Magna Global, the median age of the BET viewer during daytime is 21. In prime-time, it's just under 27 years old. That's significantly younger than just a year ago, when BET's prime-time median age was nearly 32.

In the youth-centric television business, those are demographics to die for. Some of the few cable networks that skew younger, MTV and Nickelodeon, have been, like BET, hugely profitable.

Yet with BET the only major network with "black" in its name, the focus on youth with a heavy dose of hip-hop music has long been the source of grumbling in the

black community.

It's as if white Americans had only one choice of networks — and it was MTV, Rodgers said.

"Anybody who is trying to compete with them, if they went a little bit older, they would have a much better chance," said Steve Sternberg of Magna Global. "They certainly can't get much younger."

Many who have watched BET founder Robert Johnson amass his fortune over the years admire his business decisions. Since he has never truly been pressed by a major competitor, he hasn't spent much money on programming; there are few things cheaper than filling hours with music videos.

"If you look at what advertisers want, in most instances, they want younger," said Debra Lee, BET's president. "So that's why the bulk of our programming is younger."

But Lee disputes the view that youth is everything BET is after. As the broadcast day goes on, the programming — including gospel shows and

some news — skews older, she said.

BET's decision to add syndicated programs like "Soul Food," "The Parkers" and "Girlfriends" this fall has been widely seen as an effort to bring up the median age and head TV One off at the pass.

"One of the things I see wrong about TV One is that it strikes me that they're trying to define who we are instead of trying to define who they are," Lee said. "We are the No. 1 network among black households. We reach all ages."

Rodgers, an industry veteran, steers clear of badmouthing Johnson and said black viewers who clamor for more aren't necessarily mad at BET.

"It serves an important purpose and it's just a great business," he said. "People respect that and respect Bob. What they don't like is that they don't have any choices."

In addition to their startup programming slate, TV One is also working with New Millennium Studios, the company created by former

"WKRP in Cincinnati" actor Tim Reid, to develop movies and series.

The new network will steer clear of news and sports, ceding that territory to the Atlanta-based Major Broadcasting Corp., which in February announced plans for a spinoff 24-hour news network for blacks.

If any of Johnson's business decisions that can be questioned, it's that he didn't invest over the years in a series of BET-affiliated networks that would cover a broader spectrum of interests — like Discovery Communications did with its 14 networks.

BET has created separate networks devoted to jazz, hip-hop and gospel music and helped launch, with Starz, a service of black-oriented movies.

"I don't think we've had any missed opportunities," Lee said. "We just have gone into markets that we thought would work."

TV One and Major Broadcasting are betting that BET was wrong.

They have a tough task.

The industry is littered with failed networks; one BET competitor, New Urban Entertainment Television, gave up last year.

TV One hasn't announced any commitments by cable or satellite operators to carry its signal yet, although Comcast, which has more than 20 million subscribers nationally, would seem to give it a head start.

Major Broadcasting is barely in a quarter of the nation's 107 million TV homes, not necessarily a strong base for a spinoff all-news network. The company is vague about a startup date, saying only it hopes to begin next year.

BET casts a long shadow, even if its relative paucity of news gave rise to the plans for Major's all-news cable network, said Greg Morrison, Major's news director.

"They have the advertisers, they have the households, they have the name recognition, they have 20-something years in the game," he said. But, he added, "we truly believe there is a market out there that we can serve."

Black-owned firm gets FedEx service contract

By Roderick C. Willis
Special to Sentinel-Voice

WASHINGTON (NNPA)—Forty-five years ago, a small Black boy worked alongside his mother, picking cotton in the fields of Moscow, Tenn. The backbreaking work, scars from cotton thorns on his hands and the southern summer heat burned permanent memories into his brain. "That experience motivated me for life and even at that young age, I knew I wanted to get my mother out of those blazing cotton fields, and I wanted to go with her."

Recently, Carnelious Jones, president and CEO of OMO Petroleum, flew to Memphis, just 40 miles east of Moscow, and signed a historic contract with Federal Express. The Baltimore-based firm is the first African-American-owned wholesale distributor of petroleum products to Federal Express and has begun fueling the company's fleet of trucks at Baltimore-Washington International Airport.

It is significant that although OMO is a minority firm, the contract was not awarded as a minority set-aside or part of a sheltered-market program. The FedEx contract was competitively bid and awarded because Jones and OMO Petroleum Co., the lowest bidder, had the capacity and the technical expertise to perform the job.

OMO also owns a petroleum tank farm on the Wicomico River in Salisbury, Md., with the capacity to store 2.5 million gallons of fuel for redistribution, and to store and redistribute lubricants.

The FedEx contract will run for two years and OMO will make two deliveries of fuel daily, filling each truck in the fleet to guarantee next-day and on-time delivery.

Jones has invested heavily in technology for this contract. Each FedEx truck is equipped with computer systems that identify it and calculate the amount of fuel delivered. The data is transferred electronically to the OMO fuel delivery truck, and then downloaded to OMO computers at corporate headquarters.

The process continues through a partnership with Texas Southern University, the only historically Black university (See Contract, Page 14)

Fire

(Continued from Page 1) an automatic fire extinguisher built into the hood system, but accumulated grease in the area fueled the fire and made it impossible for the extinguisher system to work properly, he said. Also destroyed in the fire were 1st Lady Boutique, Shoe Nique and J & D Mini Market.

"I have no thoughts about what happened today other than this is a disaster" Black said.

He and wife, Cassandra, operated the family business that also employed a son, daughter and a dozen others. The Blacks grew the business from a corner operation near Owens Avenue and "N" Street where they sold barbecue dinners in a church parking lot to the sit-down restaurant.

H & H Chef Austin Tabalda, who works the day shift, had just gotten off a bus to walk to the restaurant when he realized his job was burning.

"When I turned the corner and saw the restaurant on fire, I thought, 'Oh God, what is going on,'" said Tabalda. He arrives at work at 5:30 a.m. to start the stoves, fryers, and ovens in preparation of the break-

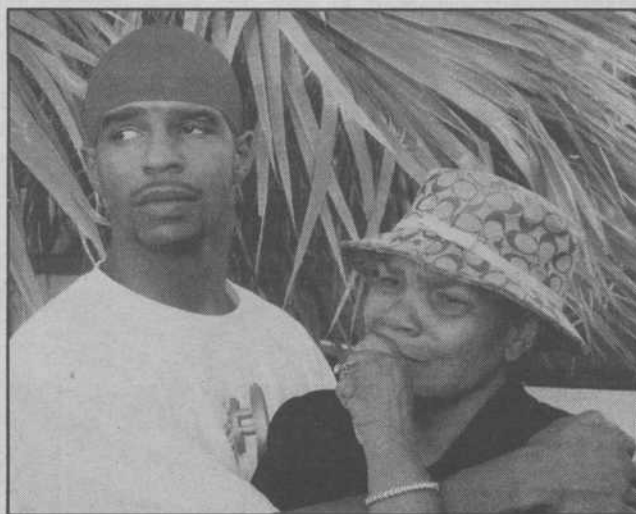


Photo special to Sentinel-Voice by G. Donovan Chambers

Barbara Nickleson, owner of 1st Lady Boutique, weeps with son Gabriel Bulin. Nickleson's business was amongst those destroyed in Wednesday's fire that gutted H&H.

fast rush at 7 a.m.

"I would have been in there," he said with a glazed expression. "I have over \$500 worth of tools in there, but I guess somehow I will replace them, the tools can be replaced I can't. This is a sad day for our community, this fire will put 12 to 14 people out of work at H & H alone not counting the other people who work in these other businesses here."

Barbara Nickleson, owner of 1st Lady Boutique, had no insurance. "I just let my insurance lapse a few months ago," she said. "Business was slow and my insurance was high because I'm located next

to a restaurant."

Son, Gabriel Bulin, comforted her. "This is the third fire she's been in over the past 16 years. My mom has been in this location for 16 years. She is the original first tenant in this plaza," he said.

The restaurant was a favorite Soul Food eatery frequented by politicians, gaming executives, business owners, entertainers, celebrities, tourists and locals.

At any given time, patrons could find themselves dining with the likes of boxer Mike Tyson or having a friendly chat with former Las Vegas City Councilman Frank Hawkins, Assembly-

man Wendell P. Williams, Commissioner Yvonne Atkinson Gates, Las Vegas City Councilman Larry Weekly or Urban Chamber President Hannah Brown.

"It was a great restaurant. Hank had the best barbecue in town, said Hawkins, who is currently executive director of the Community Development Programs Center of Nevada.

"It's unfortunate, but hopefully Hank will start up somewhere else. It was nice to have a sit-down restaurant and we need more than one. I look forward to seeing him re-establish the business."

In the past four years, the restaurant grew to be the place most in the community turned to for soul food. Assemblyman Williams often had his vehicle washed while waiting for a to-go order from the restaurant that locals voted Best of Las Vegas.

"I ate there all the time, the people there treated you like family, like you were at home. Their ribs are my favorite," Williams said. "My prayers are with all those affected by the fire, I know they will be back in someway or another."