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How HGTV Canada built a specialty powerhouse and a global following

BY LAURA KANE, THE CANADIAN PRESS AUGUST 22, 2014



(FROM LEFT) Bryan Baeumler, Mike Holmes and Scott McGillivray are seen in this undated handout photo. The three HGTV Canada personalities are teaming up on season one of Canada's Handyman Challenge. THE CANADIAN PRESS/ HO, HGTV Canada

TORONTO - Mike Holmes never wanted to be on television.

The straight-talking builder had worked as a contractor for decades before he wound up filling in behind the scenes on an HGTV Canada show. While in a network executive's office one day, Holmes

— a passionate defender of practical home-building — gave him a piece of his mind.

"I said, 'You know what, I watch the shows on your channel and this is poor information that I'm seeing. I'm sick and tired of seeing people getting screwed and fixing crap that doesn't make sense,'" recalled Holmes. "He stood up and said, 'I want a pilot right away.'"

Now, Holmes's no-nonsense style is at the heart of HGTV Canada's success. The network has built a specialty powerhouse based on authentic Canadians — generally choosing real experts over slick personalities — and offering a reliable stable of home-improvement and house-hunting shows.

The formula has paid off. In a market where many networks are scrambling for a homegrown hit, HGTV Canada boasts a startling number of highly rated Canuck shows (the network's licence dictates that 50 per cent of its shows be Canadian). Eight out of the top 10 shows on the network during the winter/spring 2014 season were Canadian, among them "Timber Kings," "Canada's Handyman Challenge" and "Leave it To Bryan."

Beyond our borders, fans of fix-it shows have become accustomed to Canadian scenery and housing markets: 75 per cent of HGTV Canada's programming has sold in the U.S. "Timber Kings," which follows the adventures of log home builders in Williams Lake, B.C., airs in more than 30 countries.

"'Timber Kings' is number one, hands down. That show just smashed all kinds of records for us here at HGTV," said Christine Shipton, Shaw Media's vice president of original content.

The series swiftly became the highest-rated show ever on the network when it premiered earlier this year. For Shipton, it's a prime example of what the network is doing well.

"I really think the ability to bring character and stories into renovation and home decor is what's really keeping up our channel's momentum," she said. "We really can't just be a how-to channel anymore."

Specialty channels have a far better chance of producing successful Canadian shows than conventional networks, said Douglas Barrett, CTV professor of broadcast management at York University's Schulich School of Business.

"Everybody would fall over if eight of the 10 top shows on CTV were Canadian," said Barrett, who is unaffiliated with the network that endows his professorship. "We always talk in drama about how difficult it is to produce shows that are creatively competitive when the U.S. studios will routinely spend \$3 million or more an hour."

Reality shows are cheaper to produce and viewers don't expect them to be celebrity-laden. Canada has now launched so many successful specialty channels that a strong talent pool of producers and creators has developed here, said Barrett.

Still, he said a top 10 that featured eight Canadian shows was significant even for a specialty network. "They should be very proud of themselves," he said.

Holmes says the decision to join HGTV came down to the opportunity to educate Canadians. On "Holmes on Homes," which ran between 2001 and 2008, he visited families who had been cheated or deserted during their home renovations.

"There's no doubt that at the time HGTV took a huge risk bringing out 'Holmes on Homes.' They were very afraid of that, because I was throwing big blocks through glass windows. They thought, 'Oh my god, we're going to get sued,'" said Holmes, 51.

Once his show became a massive hit — it was once the highest-rated show on the network — executives at both HGTV and other specialty channels took notice, he said.

"There were a lot of people who tried to copy. Then there was smart stuff, like Bryan Baeumler and Scott McGillivray. They're not actors. They're not afraid of the camera. They're being themselves. So I think this started a whole new way of doing television production."

He went on to launch "Holmes Inspection," which profiles botched home inspections, and "Holmes Make it Right," in which he renovates disaster-struck homes. His kids Michael and Sherry have become regular fixtures on his shows and his latest father-son team-up "Mike's Ultimate Garage" will air Sept. 1.

McGillivray, 36, looks the part of a television host more than other HGTV stars but is a full-time real estate investor. As the host of "Income Property," he helps homeowners renovate properties to include rental suites.

The show was a tough sell at first because "no one else was saying the word 'rent' on TV," he said. But now it airs in over 40 countries and McGillivray sees tweets and Facebook messages from fans from all over the world — Spain, Korea, Costa Rica, Thailand.

"Filming the majority of the show in Toronto is definitely an advantage. It's such a multicultural city that we have people from all over the world here," he said.

"I'm not keeping track, but I know that a lot of the time when we have somebody who speaks a foreign language, I always say, 'How do you say 'cheques to the bank' in Korean?' Then the show will end up airing in that country and people will write in and say, 'Your Korean is hilarious.'"

McGillivray's show, like others on HGTV, is aspirational — fans tell him they like to watch not only for the design and construction elements, but because they want to learn more about real estate investment.

He was acutely aware that the 2008 housing crash might put a damper on his show. But people kept tuning in, and McGillivray firmly believes he provides a realistic way for middle-class Canadians to get rich.

"I always say that real estate is the everyday person's way into becoming wealthy," he said. "If you're investing in the stock market, it takes a lot of money to make money. In real estate, because of leverage, the average individual can make significant returns if they know what they're doing."

Baeumler, meanwhile, joked that his series "Leave it to Bryan" should be renamed "The Bad News Bryan Show." In the series, which returns for a new season Monday, homeowners allow Baeumler to decide which renovation they need most.

While they may crave a home theatre or granite kitchen counters, he often finds an under-the-surface

defect that is more worthy of a fix. He said his fans — which are also spread out in dozens of countries all over the globe — are drawn to the idea of someone else making the tough call.

"Everybody has an angel on one shoulder and a devil on the other. The devil is whispering, 'You need a big-screen TV and a man cave and to turn the garage into a shop.' Whereas the angel is saying, 'You should really fix that single-pane window,'" said Baeumler.

"I think everybody knows deep down what they should do... I think occasionally we need someone to come in and take the stress out of making the decision, to make the right decision for us."