

Bridging the Gap Year: A case study

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Introduction

Game of Thrones (“GOT”) is a popular Home Box Office (“HBO”) cable series watched in 170 countries by an audience of over a billion people¹, making it the most popular series in the world (and in TV history).

Adapted from a book series by George R.R. Martin and set in the fictional world of Westeros, GOT has fantasy elements, from heroes to villains, dragons to wights, which has provided for a rich visual aesthetic.

HBO has committed a large budget to the series (\$100 million for ten episodes in 2016²), resulting in a high-degree of production value, a hallmark of the channel’s programming.

The show’s popularity has resulted in successive renewals by HBO, encompassing all of the books that Martin has written thus far, taking its place as the network’s flagship program with three times as many viewers as any other production by the network³.



Figure 1. Characters from GOT: Cersei Lannister, Tyrion Lannister, Jon Snow, Daenerys Targaryen. From timeincuk.net.

The Problem

GOT did not have an 8th season in 2018, skipping the entire programming cycle⁴. Instead, the showrunners and HBO decided to push the last season to 2019, in addition to shortening the season to six episodes.

The main challenge that GOT marketers was to maintain interest in the show, attract a new audience before the season, and target audience members who had stopped watching the program.

This presented an enormous challenge for HBO since interest in programs tend to wane if new content is not being produced.

Primary Challenges

Understanding the problem, HBO's marketing team faced several challenges during this "gap" year:

1. Keep the current audience's attention during this span.
2. Attracting a new audience to the show.
3. Attracting old audience viewers back to the show for the final season.



Figure 2. The Targaryen sigil. From thenerdy.com

GOT marketers had to devise a strategy that would keep the program within the pop culture conversation. The show is already known for large, dramatic events, so the advertising would have to reflect GOT's spirit.

The advertising campaigns HBO chose stayed within the show's spirit for advertising. For example, the 2019 Budweiser-GOT Super Bowl showed the Mountain, a character from the show, kill the "Bud Knight," a requirement that HBO wanted for the spot⁵.



The Background

Beginning with GOT's first season in 2011, HBO has used many different media channels as part of its GOT advertising blitz, an "all of the above" integrated marketing strategy that used all available channels⁶, including some unique "guerilla" advertising approaches and mobile games.



Figure 3. Game of Thrones Conquest, a game created for the Android platform. From broadcastingcable.com.

Since the first episode Season 8, millions of GOT have watched the program⁷, demonstrating the success of HBO's advertising and marketing approach.

The momentum from the end of Season 7, when over 16 million viewers watched the season finale⁸, continued into Season 8 as well despite the absence of GOT in 2018.

The audience just gets larger and larger, gaining momentum⁹.



Corporate responsibility

Part of HBO's approach is based on a sense of responsibility the network feels toward GOT as an IP, so the marketing department doesn't view the show as merely another program to advertise.

As said by Chris Spadaccini, executive VP and president of marketing at HBO¹⁰:

"We could probably do absolutely nothing and shatter every ratings record in the book . . . we feel an enormous responsibility to commemorate what is arguably one of the greatest TV shows ever made, that has cemented its place in popular culture."

Spadaccini sees GOT as a throwback due to its popularity despite audience fragmentation.

"It really is one of the last remaining mono-cultural events where I get the feeling the world will be watching in real time because they don't want to be left out. In that respect, it's more akin to a World Cup than just a TV show."

Key demographic

Millennials, those audience members born between 1981 and the early 2000s, are GOT's largest and most important audience demographic. As a result, GOT marketers have specifically strategized toward this group¹¹.

"We could probably do absolutely nothing and shatter every ratings record in the book . . . we feel an enormous responsibility to commemorate what is arguably one of the greatest TV shows ever made, that has cemented its place in popular culture."

Chris Spadaccini, executive VP and president of marketing at HBO.

According to Lucinda Martinez, HBO's SVP of Multicultural Marketing¹²:

"The original intent was to really find what we felt were the cultural passion points that we could use to promote Game of Thrones and attract a younger, millennial audience. That's always been the key."



How HBO met the challenge

The network responded with an advertising campaign that included innovative marketing ideas that demonstrated the power of GOT as a worldwide cultural icon.

HBO's mixed-medium strategy included a variety of channels, from Twitter to live-action promotions that involved characters and props in the show, such as the Iron Throne or character actors.

Ad campaign components



Figure 4. A Season 8 promo showing Arya Stark on the iron Throne. From hbo.com.

Most importantly, HBO invested \$20 million into its advertising budget for Season 8¹³.

HBO developed mobile games as well as other interactive marketing approaches¹⁴.

Live action advertising, such as the White Walkers in London and the Iron Throne scavenger hunt.

GOT actors, having both numbers and fame, made many appearances on talk shows.

HBO leveraged GOT's cultural significance into a marketing tool as metaphorically powerful as dragon fire.

Cross-promotions included a variety of brands, from Oreo to Spotify.

GOT merchandising, such as the "Air Arya" shirt after season 8, episode 3¹⁵.

Tie-ins with other pop culture elements, such as bands and musicians (Coldplay, Ed Sheeran, Mastodon).



Marketing campaigns

HBO's marketing team over the show's history has engaged in a widespread marketing campaign across the world, often involving characters or objects from the show, giving it visibility and word-of-mouth news¹⁶.

For example, the character known as the Night King, along with his fellow wights, were seen on the streets of London¹⁷.



Figure 5. The Night King in London. From timeincuk.net



Figure 6. The Night King rides in a London alley. From uinterview.com.

GOT has many advantages for an advertiser:

- Pop culture relevance
- On a popular cable network.
- High production value
- A compelling story
- A diverse cast characters
- Beautiful locations
- Attractive actors
- Violence and sex.

Due to GOT's powerful social capital, many brands have sought to align themselves to the series.

Examples of GOT co-branding advertising campaigns with the potential to reach into diverse markets¹⁸:

1. Oreos
2. Red Cross
3. The New York Mets
4. Mountain Dew
5. AT&T
6. Budweiser



Campaign ads

Altogether, more than 100 brands¹⁹, such as Red Bull, Spotify, and Sesame Street, have taken part in a GOT's media campaign for 2018-2019.

Examples of these campaigns:

The Budweiser Super Bowl commercial

Red Cross blood-drive partnership: "Bleed for the Throne."

AT&T Partnership that included in-store displays and an Iron Throne giveaway.



Figure 8. An AT&T interactive GOT display at a store in Chicago. From dnainfo.com.



Figure 7. The Mountain killing the Budweiser Knight. From polygon.com.



Figure 9. The Red Cross Bleed for the Throne blood drive campaign. From medium.com

As described by Valerie Vargas, SVP of advertising and creative services at AT&T²⁰:

"This is the biggest television event in recent history, in large part due to the show's passionate, loyal and committed fan base. In celebration of that fandom, and as fans ourselves, we have created unique experiences across all of our platforms that only AT&T and HBO can offer. With this campaign we aim to celebrate the show's superfans and its permanent place in pop culture."



Old media marketing

The huge amount of media appearances by the cast members on TV shows, especially late night talk shows.

The affable personalities of the cast members and the sheer number of them, with dozens of characters, has been a boon to the show for advertising purposes.

The use of old media, such as late-night show, furthers GOT's inroad into markets that do not necessarily respond to social media.



Figure 10. Actors Maisie Williams and Sophie Turner talk to USA Today about Season 8. From usaday.com.

Social media marketing

Social media has proven to be a huge boon to HBO and GOT marketing, especially since much of the content is created by audience members themselves.

Relevant factors:

GOT has had strong social media numbers with tens of millions of followers.

GOT-related hashtags on platforms such as Twitter and Instagram have been popular.

After Season 8's premiere, GOT hashtags were the top trending ones on the platform.

User-created remediations has resulted in a huge amount of web 1.0 (such as fan websites) and web 2.0 (Instagram, Twitter, and YouTube) content.

YouTube, in particular, has terabytes of GOT content, from fan videos to episode reviews to scene segments.

Reaction videos have proved to be very popular as well.

The Burlington Bar, a tavern in Vermont, produces weekly videos, with millions of views, of patrons reacting to episodes from watch parties.



A Song of Ads and Memes

Since the program began in 2011, HBO has used many different media channels as part of its GOT marketing campaign to build its fanbase, especially via digital means²¹.

Its social media activity, in particular, is well known, especially after various GOT memes became popular, such as “Winter is Coming” and “Hodor” memes, becoming digital forms of word-of-mouth, endlessly remediated advertising.



Figure 11. The original GOT meme with Ned Stark that riffed on the “Winter is coming” phrase. From knowyourmemes.com

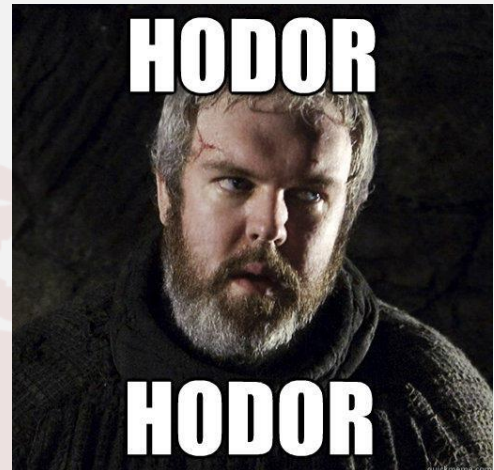


Figure 12 “Hodor,” the only words said by Hodor. From knowyourmemes.com



Figure 13. Riffing on the phrase, “Not Today,” from Season 8, Ep3, as a hashtag. From Twitter.com



Figure 14. Pres. Trump riffs on “Winter is coming.” From <https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump>



The end result

The validity of HBO's marketing approach was underscored by season 8's ratings, which are higher than ever.

Season 8's broke new records with 17.4 million viewers, and increase over Season 7's finale 16.1 million viewers.

Subsequent Season 8 episodes have maintained higher audience numbers, including April 30's spectacular battle at Winterfell, which had 17.8 million viewers (more than double the total audience size from just 2016, when 8.9 million watched the Season Six finale).

Since the first episode of this current seasons, hundreds of millions of GOT fans have watched the program, demonstrating the success of HBO's advertising and marketing approach.

According to an analysis at Silligent, HBO's GOT marketing has three lessons:

1. Use location to build excitement, as demonstrated by the Iron Throne scavenger hunt.
2. Leverage immersive experiences, such as the "Bleed for the Throne" at SXSW.
3. Take the hype to the next level with co-branded collaborations, e.g., the Budweiser Super Bowl ad.

In the final analysis, one key factor was the most important: The high ratings that continue in Season 8, GOT's last hurrah, continuing the trend of an enlarging audience.

It is a demonstration that HBO's multi-channel media approach, social media and non-digital advertising strategies, had high payoffs in the end.

If anyone won the advertising game of thrones, it was HBO.



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