

Demographics - Target Audience Analysis

Based on such things as age, sex, socioeconomic status, educational level, etc., program content preferences will differ. These preferences are also different for different parts of the United States (North, South, urban, rural, etc.). Audience characteristics are referred to as demographics.

These regional demographic variations can in part be seen by differences in the local programming broadcast in different parts of the country—and sometimes by the films and network programming that some local stations decide not to air. Chief among the content issues are sex and violence--both of which have been shown to have a positive relationship to ratings.

Demographics determine the acceptability of some types of content. Generally speaking (and, of course, there are many exceptions), when it comes to sexual themes, for example, people who live in Northern urban areas of the United States tend to be more tolerant than people who have a rural background and live in the South.

Education is also related. Research shows that, generally speaking, the more education an audience has, the less opposition there will be to sexual themes. Interestingly, it appears that this relationship seems to reverse when it comes to violence.

Knowing that more than 40,000 women die each year of breast cancer in the United States, and that most of these deaths could be prevented by early detection, a female program manager of a TV station in the South decided to run a PSA on doing a breast self-examination. Even though the PSA ran late at night and seemed rather bland in its approach, there was immediate negative reaction from members of the audience who thought that the subject matter was too personal. Consequently, because of viewer complaints the PSA had to be canceled.

At the same time, PBS (Public Broadcasting) stations have run programming with full frontal nudity late at night without appreciable reaction. The difference? Demographics. The people who were most apt to complain weren't watching, and the people who were watching were least apt to complain.

You may have a compulsion to "just tell it like it is" and not be concerned if you alienate your audience. If you consistently disregard audience preferences and predispositions, you will have a limited future in TV production. But, what if you are not producing programming for broadcast or general distribution?

Compared to standard broadcast television, institutional television, which includes corporate and educational video, has different needs and expectations. But, here, too, demographic characteristics, such as age, sex, and education influence a production's form and content.

In institutional television the producer and scriptwriter also have to be fully aware of the audience's experience, education, needs, and expectations. For example, to *underestimate* education or experience and inadvertently "talk down to" an audience insults them. To *overestimate* education or experience and talk over everyone's head is just as bad. Either way you lose.