

Marketing a TV Series: Building *The Sea Beyond* Series Success

Maria Giovanna Devetag
Luiss University

Giovanni Zizzerini
Luiss Business School

Walter Ingrassia
Rai Fiction

TEACHING CASES 2023

MARKETING A TV SERIES: BUILDING THE SEA BEYOND SERIES SUCCESS

ALESSANDRO: How was *The Sea Beyond* last night? It was a rough night... I mean... when there is the Champions League it's not easy...

CHRISTIAN: Really difficult indeed, the Juventus-Barcelona match had more than 6 million viewers, a 23% share, but *The Sea Beyond* did well, the second season finale had around 1.2 million viewers, that is a 6.1% share.

ALESSANDRO: I fully agree, the show has its market, you have a lot of fans but are you going to renew the series with a new season?

CHRISTIAN: We'll see pretty soon, tomorrow I have an internal meeting to discuss the future of the series, everything is at stake at the moment...

ALESSANDRO: Good luck with the meeting, we'll catch up during the weekend...

CHRISTIAN: okay, ciao!

1. *The Sea Beyond*

The Sea Beyond is a Rai series, born from an original idea of Cristiana Farina and written by Cristiana Farina and Maurizio Careddu. Co-produced by Rai Fiction and Picomedia and distributed by Beta Film, the series stars Carolina Crescentini, Carmine Recano, Valentina Romani, Nicolas Maupas, Massimiliano Caiazzo, Giacomo Giorgio, Ar Tem, Vincenzo Ferrera, Antonio Orefice, Antonio De Matteo, Anna Ammirati and currently consists of two seasons, each with 12 episodes by 50’.

The Sea Beyond tells the story of a group of young inmates at the Juvenile Penitentiary Center in Naples, overlooking the sea. Filippo (Nicolas Maupas) is a middle-class boy from Milan, a model son and student who, after a crazy night in Naples, is held responsible for the death of his best friend. Carmine (Massimiliano Caiazzo), a boy from Secondigliano, does everything to escape the criminal fate foreseen by his family of origin. In fact, the family calls him “piecuro” (sheep in Napolitan) because he would like to find a honest job. But when the son of the leader of a rival gang tries to rape his girlfriend, Carmine reacts in a brutal way. Edoardo (Matteo Paolillo), sixteen years old, is a little criminal boss. He already has a son on the way from his girlfriend who is waiting for him outside, but falls in love with Teresa, a student who volunteers in prison. Viola (Serena De Ferrari) killed her mother for no apparent reason and she doesn’t seem to regret what she did. Naditza (Valentina Romani) is a gipsy girl who prefers to stay inside rather than go back to the nomad camp where her father wants her to marry a horrible man. The young inmates live side by side with the adults who govern the penitentiary: the ambitious director (Carolina Crescentini), the passionate commander of the penitentiary police (Carmine Recano), the educators, the cook, the barber and all those who every day try to open a small window to a brighter future rather than what those kids are intimately convinced should be their fate.

The first season, directed by Carmine Elia, was broadcast on Rai 2 in six evenings from 29 September to 28 October 2020, obtaining an average audience of 1.7 million viewers and a 7.4% share.

The second season, directed by Milena Coccozza and Ivan Silvestrini, was also broadcast on Rai 2 from 17 November to 22 December 2021 with an average audience of 1.3 million viewers and a 6.1% share. Continuing the stories narrated in the first season, in the new episodes the young delinquents find themselves facing their own families and are called to make a choice: follow in their parents’ footsteps or choose a different life. New characters enter the Institute such as Kubra, a girl of Nigerian origins guilty of attempted matricide, and Sasà, a boy arrested for rape, a crime he is convinced he did not commit. It is with this second season that something clicks and the *The Sea Beyond* phenomenon finally takes off.

Parallel to the linear broadcast on the proprietary digital platform of the public service Rai Play, the series develops an audience equal to 50% of the television one, driving the online consumption of the first season and reaching a total – from the debut to the time of writing – of 54 million legitimate streams¹. Both the online consumption and the social media engagement generated –

1. It is a digital TV stream started and displayed for at least 300 milliseconds. Streams with a duration of less than 300ms are not actually counted or contribute to any metrics.

thanks to the direct involvement of the young actors who engaged a large fan base – contribute to testify how much *The Sea Beyond* was able to involve and activate extraordinary volumes in the extra-television sphere.

The Sea Beyond represents a further step in the direction of progressive diversification and experimentation on genres initiated by Rai on the fiction offer for Rai 2. It's a well-designed strategy that has been carried out and strengthened over the years with the creation of successful serial titles (also distributed internationally) such as the detective-comedy *Inspector Coliandro – The Return* and the procedural *Rocco Schiavone*, based on Antonio Manzini's bestsellers, the mystery *The Red Door* and the crime series *The Hunter*.

The Sea Beyond is a “coming of age” story² set in an extreme context in which feelings are exasperated and one cannot escape dealing with oneself. Filled with death threats, love stories, escapes, football matches, fights and downward spirals, the series tells the story of a group of adolescents who aspire to create a future that is sometimes impossible to achieve, but that only hope and dreams can make real. A story of personal growth and entrance into adulthood – which for the majority of adolescents occurs almost by inertia, although not without obstacles and critical issues – which in the series is characterized by an increasing tension that occasionally flows into actual violence.

Even if in the enclosure of the Juvenile penitentiary center, the characters will still have to choose who they are and who they want to become, following a growth path in which no one can hide in the role they have chosen. The inner journey of the young protagonists in the center also involves the adults who represent the institution and who have to deal with the complex group dynamics, continuously facing the dilemma between acceptance and repression, flexibility and rigor.

2. The coming-of-age story is a narrative genre focused on the growth path of a character – a child or teenager – struggling with growth and transition to adulthood.

2. The Market Structure

2.1. The Audiovisual Industry

The audiovisual sector (film, television and entertainment) is at the core of the creative industries, those industries which have their origin in individual creativity, skill and talent. The purpose of Audiovisual industries is to provide programs to inform, entertain or educate the general public, where the programs are a set of moving images with or without sound that constitute a single element within a catalog established by a media service provider. Media are traditional mass media, such as television and cinema (thus excluding radio and press as they are not vectors of moving images), and new over-the-top (OTT) distributors which, thanks to the digital revolution, use the web to convey audiovisual content.

We can identify three main markets whose main (and not ancillary) purpose can be expressed in the production and distribution of these goods: cinema, television and the web.

Television products are as a sub-category of audiovisual products and are designed to be exclusively or mainly distributed on a television platform. Television products can be sub-divided, even if the boundaries are blurry and often overlapping, in two further categories: **fiction** products, any product with a narrative structure that develops from the author's imagination and **non-fiction** products that are configured as narratives that deal with information, events or real facts, and are expressed in products such as sport and culture, entertainment (e.g. TV quizzes) as well as communication and marketing.

The fictional products in turn can be distinguished on the basis of the episodic structure; in this sense we can distinguish between **single episode** fiction (i.e. film) and **serial**.

Finally, the serials, structured on several episodes can be divided according to the narrative model used in **telefilms** and **series**. The first category is characterized by self-contained episodes in which each new episode is not the continuation or resumption of the previous one, but the beginning of a new story. On the contrary, the second category is characterized by episodes that constitute fragments of a plot. One has to note however that in contemporary television there is greater hybridization between the two narrative formulas often with a central story that ends in the episode but also a frame that extends over several episodes.

Speaking about media nowadays the distinction between the television media and the web makes no sense. The digital revolution has in fact introduced a series of new services such as Web TV, Internet TV and Over The Top TV, which offer new online distribution platforms and allow for flexible and personalized use of audiovisual content via streaming. The offer is as flexible as it is neutral with respect to the technological device used by the consumer, who can in fact display the same audiovisual content through a plurality of technological devices such as a telephone, tablet, computer or smart TVs, allowing to users' access "Anywhere, at Any time, with Any device" to on-demand video content.

2.2. Business Models in the TV Market

Peculiarities of the industry lay in the market structure as well. Historically, in the television market, there were two alternative business models: broadcast television and cable TV. The “free” nature implies that in private TV its only source of funding is the sale of advertising space, where the predominant logic is audience quantification and resale to advertisers. In public TV channels the annual license fee and the advertising represent the main revenue streams. Various operators compete with each other to have the highest audience share, particularly in the “prime-time “. It follows that audience data, strongly influences the choices of programming and decisions about the future of a show, as they determine the selling price of advertising spaces.

Cable TV has a business model based on subscription fees, in a few cases accompanied by advertising revenues (e.g. Sky). Thanks to the greater bandwidth offered by the cable or satellite, cable TV has historically been able to broadcast a very large number of channels. This potential has made it possible to overcome the concept of generalist TV, developing thematic channels capable of satisfying the needs of consumer niches, thus leading to a fragmentation of the public.

Examples of the largest cable TV operators in the United States are HBO (part of the Time Warner group), Showtime and Starz, while in Italy the main players are Mediaset Premium (now Infinity) and Sky. The subscription revenue model, the specialization of certain channels and the reduced regulatory constraints in general offer cable TV operators’ greater flexibility in the creation and distribution of content than general TV.

Both broadcasting and cable models have historically operated in a linear TV logic, by broadcasting programs sequentially, according to a rigid and predefined schedule. The possibility of using the contents through internet platforms and in Video On-Demand (VOD) mode has generated alternative operating models and business logic, as well as opening the market to new entrants. The strength of VOD services is a vast and varied library of content, available at any time, place and on any device, through a personalized search and recommendation process.

Following the success of YouTube, recently the market witnessed the explosion of video streaming services by OTT. Among the OTT services, Netflix is certainly the one that has best established itself in the international scene with a business model focused on online production and distribution, with revenues generated almost entirely by users’ subscription fees.

In the United States the number of subscribers to streaming services is expected to grow from 160 million in 2018 to 270 million in 2024.

The growing use of OTT platforms poses a clear threat to traditional TV with a reduction in the number of paid TV subscribers compared to strong growth in the pure streaming sector. In this context, traditional operators have necessarily had to expand and strengthen their offer in the VOD field over time. This is the case for the American HBO Now and Hulu (ABC, NBC and Fox) and in Italy of Infinity (Mediaset), Rai Play (Rai) and Sky Go (Sky).

In general, most of the operators, albeit each with their own specificities, have tried to develop models in continuity which are complementary to the traditional offer, with a view to preserving their identity and with it the base of loyal customers built over time.

In the Italian market, broadcasting operators have developed an on-demand offer that is also free, intended to continue and complement the generalist television experience. This is the case, for example, of Rai Play and Mediaset Infinity, the logic is making a non-linear a catch-up tool with respect to flow programming, that is, recovering lost shows or replaying content for viewers to have the chance to see them again. Secondly, the on-demand portal can be used in different ways, for example to convey original productions (e.g. Rai Play).

2.3. Digitalization

Today the main source of value seems to have shifted from material goods to intangible assets. The creative industry is a clear example of the value generated by intangible assets. In these sectors the value for consumers is the content, the physical medium with which we use the product is almost irrelevant. The digital revolution also strongly impacted the sector. The boundary between technology and creativity thins, and the two become constitutive elements of each other. From the point of view of production, digital technologies have revolutionized all phases of the value chain, reducing their duration and costs, and at the same time enormously increasing the spectrum of possible creative forms. Digital distribution channels completely demolished geographical barriers. Access to products is now practically open to everyone, making the products global by definition. As a result, every actor has the opportunity to distribute their products or services in a global market, with no more physical barriers. This phenomenon has greatly reduced the entry costs to the sector and greatly intensified competition because of a gradual market convergence with sectors that were once distinct and separate now overlapping.

2.4. Cultural Products

Cultural products share common characteristics. The first one is the subjectivity of consumer preferences which are not based on objectively quantifiable parameters. Consumers choose creative products based on their own tastes, inclinations and personal experiences, rather than on objectively measurable attributes. Second, the value of such products is more than simply the sum of their attributes. The quality of a film comes from interrelation of its ingredients (such as the actors, the script, the sound effects and the costumes). It is difficult to evaluate the contribution of an actor to the success of the film, without considering the script and costumes, etc. Third, the creative product is by its very nature a product of experience, while physical products can be evaluated before consumption through the analysis of its key attributes, experience products can be evaluated only when consumed. For this reason, since customers are not able to predict the quality of a product, the choice relies mainly on what are called quality clues such as reviews, trailer, blogs, word of mouth, the reputation of producers, distributors, actors or, more generally, the brand. Furthermore, consumer satisfaction depends on the time the individual devotes to it. Customers need time to develop thoughts and emotional states about the experience they are consuming. In

the case of a film, for example, the emotional involvement of the consumer increases with the development of the story. In fact, it is only after understanding the narrative world and the psychological traits of the characters that mechanisms for the identification with the protagonist will be activated, for example, whether or not it will lead consumers to cheer on their victory and to regret their failures as if they were living them in first person.

Traditionally, the relation between the consumer, ironically called “couch potato”, and the producer was linear and unidirectional, whereby the former would passively receive content, and was bound by exogenous constraints such as timing (films and series were broadcasted on specific dates and times decided by the production). Today, on the contrary, the public is no longer passive but active, and proves to be more and more thirsty for stories but also quick to abandon a product if not sufficiently involved from the beginning, and willing to share positive or negative opinions on social media, creating WOM that spreads instantly.

“With a series one believes one is enjoying the novelty of the story (which is always the same) while in fact one is enjoying it because of the recurrence of a narrative scheme that remains constant. The series in this sense responds to the infantile need of hearing the same story over and over again, of being consoled by the return of the Identical”³.

In addition, creative industries are also characterized by an infinite variety of products. In fact, in creative products the dimensions of differentiation are innumerable. Take actions films for example. These all share a common narrative structure, based on a hero who must overcome a series of challenges to restore an initial balance, but present countless elements of differentiation, ranging from the choice of actors to elements of the plot, to dialogues, editing, soundtracks and directors. The number of elements on which movies and TV series can be differentiated from one another therefore allows creative producers to present potentially infinite variations of the same product to the public. This hyper-fragmentation allows creative combinations of elements to match infinite combinations of tastes but also the failure of a considerable number of products. Furthermore, creative products represent symbolic resources for consumers to build their image in the social sphere and communicate it to others. They are vehicles for conveying messages to consumers, and thus have a much higher value than just a utility function. Cultural products contribute to create and share knowledge, beliefs, values, norms, habits, and fads. Creative products are now widely used by consumers as tools to build and legitimize their identity in the eyes of society, influencing other sectors and shaping the culture. For example, the *Stranger Things* TV series debut on Netflix in 2016 has paved the way not only for a cult film phenomenon, but also for the definitive return of 80’s fashion. Five years after the debut of the series, the fashion industry is following this trend embracing 80s-style clothing with fluorescent colors etc. Another example of cross-industries influences is represented by the British style presented in *The Peaky Blinders* clearly repurposed by Ralph Lauren in the 2022 fall winter campaign (Annex n. 1).

3. Eco, U. (2005). Innovation & Repetition: Between Modern & Postmodern Aesthetics. *Daedalus*, 134(4), 191-207. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20028022>.

For this reason, the development of a TV show should be also consistent with the *zeitgeist*, i.e. what is happening in the deepest currents of a society at a given moment. This term does not refer to a fad or a passing trend but rather to social trends that last for at least a generation. An example of a successful series reflecting the 90's upper class cultural zeitgeist is Beverly Hills 90210.

3. Marketing a TV series

The Sea Beyond has been nominated for Nastro d'Argento (the series won Nastro d'Argento Speciale for the first season and Nastro d'Argento-Nuovo Imago for the second season), and Christian spent few days in Rome during which he was asked to deliver a presentation about marketing a TV series: in his talk, he pointed out relevant marketing aspects that are specific to the industry.

3.1. *The Product Development*

The first insight shared by Christian in his presentation concerns product development. Traditionally, the idea generates from the creativity of a writer, producer and/or rights holder who can be internal or external to the broadcaster's production house. The idea is presented to the network in the form of a pitch that includes a brief description of the idea, identification of the genre and target audience, and illustration of the unique selling points. The producers then carry out an initial evaluation of the product appeal by analyzing, for example, potential results in terms of audience and success of past titles of the same genre. It must be pointed out that digitalization partially changed this process: the idea no longer stems from creators alone, but it is accompanied and strongly supported in each step by analyses of big data. In fact, online content views generate a huge amount of information about consumer behavior (e.g. duration of the viewing, in the fast forward, in the rewind, duration of pauses during the viewing, etc.), and such enormous database is further enriched by data concerning actions of consumers on social networks. The analysis of this information contributes to trace the profile of each spectator, his or her tastes, preferences and habits of consumption. Thanks to big data analysis, networks such as Netflix and Disney+ are able to create products that respond accurately to the tastes of target audiences. Netflix, in particular, developed an algorithm that allows one to compare a proposed idea with a very rich historical database of titles on the platform and estimate the size and composition of the audience that will potentially appreciate the title. The algorithm does not prescribe how to produce a TV series, a task that is still entrusted to the creativity of screenwriters, but it assists them along the way by suggesting what is most convenient to develop. As mentioned before, it is thanks to its big data analysis that Netflix has successfully intercepted the sensitivity of Gen X towards TV series with a typical 80's and 90's atmosphere. This opportunity led to the development of "nostalgia" and "revival" strategies, such as, for example, the relaunch of the famous sitcom "Friends", which culminated with the creation of the television series "Stranger Things" targeting multiple generations. Stranger Things is in fact a teen drama developed for the primary target audience of teenagers but also attracting members of Generation X, eager to be brought back to the 80's.

3.2. *Promotion*

The TV landscape has changed profoundly. Netflix released more originals in 2019 than the entire television industry did in 2005. In the USA, about eight thousand new television series have been released between 2020 and 2022.

In this context, the role of promotion becomes vital, given the high probability for any given new series to pass unnoticed among the infinite variety of alternative productions available to the consumer. Christian continues his presentation focusing on crucial promotion tools in marketing a TV series:

- The **trailer** is a short preview of the content of a television series, lasting about three minutes, in which very short glimpses of the most salient scenes are inserted strategically to provide the audience with an overview of the plot and of the atmosphere. The trailer is usually released a month before the television series debuts on multiple platforms to attract the widest audience of prospects.
- The **teaser** is a shorter promotional video, typically less than a minute, which usually contains a very short overview of clips from the series. The teasers, which come from the English verb “to tease”, are intended to generate anticipation, curiosity and interest in the trailer itself, giving elements of anticipation that will then be fed with the release of the latter. Together teasers and trailers constitute, more than any other promotional element, tools with a very high potential for audience engagement.
- **Offline channels** are mainly printed ads such as flyers, brochures and posters, billboards, advertising in newspapers and on TV, live events. Off-line outdoor channels, as well as the press (weekly, monthly and daily), are still widely used during promotional campaigns.
- **Unconventional marketing** campaigns can amaze the audience to the point of pushing viewers to talk about them, to share their content, ingeniously equipping them with the virality potential typical of social media. The campaign for the launch of the fifth season of *House of Cards* in Italy in 2017 during the Italian political election is a good example (Annex n.2).

Christian ends his presentation by mentioning the crucial role of online channels nowadays:

- **Online channels** such as the Internet and social networks are today the most important means of communication for the promotion of a television series. On the web, the action of the networks is carried out mainly through display advertising, banners and promotional videos placed on textual sites, such as blogs or the online pages of newspapers, and in videos from free platforms such as Youtube. Social media, such as Instagram, Facebook, Twitter and recently TikTok, are key channels for television series. For example, the social profile of *Stranger Things* has more than twenty-five million followers on Instagram, *Peaky Blinders* has almost one million followers on Twitter, and *Walking Dead* is liked by more than thirty-two million people on Facebook. On social media, meme advertising is a fundamental promotion tool.

4. *The Sea Beyond*, season 3

In March 2022, Rai renewed the series for a third and fourth season. In June 2022, at the end of the protection period in which the public service exercised its rights for on-demand⁴, the production company Picomedia was able to exercise the SVOD rights⁵ by closing the distribution agreement on the Netflix platform, where the series immediately entered the Top 10 and remained among the most viewed titles for several weeks.

Also from the point of view of international distribution, the series has been a great success and Beta Film has closed agreements with WarnerMedia Latin America and HBO Max, the Swedish free-to-air channel TV4, the Israeli HOT and the Blu TV streamer in Turkey.

Christian will be in charge of the marketing campaign to launch the new season and he is starting to think about how to develop a successful marketing strategy to sustain and increase the growth of *The Sea Beyond*.

Annexe n.1 – Ralph Lauren 2022 social campaign inspired by *The Peaky Blinders* style



4. Until that date, the FVOD (Free Video on Demand) and AVOD (Advertising-based Video on Demand) rights on the series were owned by the broadcaster. In other words, it is the possibility for the holder of the rights – in this case the broadcaster – to allow free viewing on his own proprietary platform, providing or not the insertion of advertising without the user's obligation to pay any subscription.
5. SVOD (Subscription Video On Demand) rights prescribe that a service provider grants the user permission to access a specific online content in exchange for a monthly subscription.

Annex n. 2 - The House of Cards marketing campaign

