



FOOD TV: AN EFFECTIVE STRATEGY FOR FOOD AND BEVERAGE MARKETING?

As the popularity of food television continues to grow, businesses are turning to new marketing approaches to get them on TV screens nightly. Is it worth the time and money invested?

Words by Dr Michelle Phillipov

Food and beverage marketing has become more sophisticated and complex in recent years. Today's consumers are increasingly cynical about conventional advertising strategies, so traditional methods of advertising and marketing are now often less effective than they may have once been.

As a result, businesses are turning to newer approaches that involve integrating marketing and promotional strategies across a range of media platforms.

Among the various options, television is often seen as a particularly attractive option for promoting food and beverage businesses. From primetime ratings hits, like *MasterChef* and *My Kitchen Rules* (MKR), to niche programs aimed at 'foodie' audiences, such as *Gourmet Farmer*, *Ben's Menu* and *Paddock to Plate*, food television has become a mainstay of public, commercial and cable TV, with programs frequently reaching large, national audiences.

Many food television programs commonly feature food and beverage products and producers, making them seem ideally suited to food and beverage promotion.

However, television's promotional opportunities do not necessarily benefit all businesses equally. Television's mainstream prominence, and the significant profile that this affords producers, means that it offers some key advantages and



Running for the past seven years, Network 10's MasterChef Australia is currently located in Melbourne.

pitfalls that are worth considering before engaging with the medium.

Types of food television appearances

With the exception of paid advertisements during commercial breaks, there are two main mechanisms through which food and beverage producers can access the promotional potential of food television.

The first is through formalised sponsorship arrangements. The food and beverage products and producers who appear on major primetime shows like *MasterChef* and *MKR* are largely the result of these kinds of relationships. These are negotiated deals, the details of which are highly confidential, but which result in the brands of sponsors appearing within

episodes in the form of product placement, integration of brands in storylines, branded tie-ins and other kinds of branded content.

When the *MKR* contestants cook for the farmers who supply fresh produce to Coles, or when the *MasterChef* contestants relax at home drinking Vittoria coffee, these are some of the results of formalised sponsorship deals.

The promotional value of these deals is massive. For example, the success of Coles' sponsorship of *MasterChef* and *MKR* has been credited with helping the supermarket chain close the profit gap with rival Woolworths.¹ These deals are also expensive, demanding the kind of marketing budget only possible for larger businesses.

Another method that food and beverage producers can use to get

their products on television is through more informal arrangements with the show's production team. These are characteristic of niche programs, such as *Gourmet Farmer* and *Paddock to Plate*, which due to broadcaster regulations, budgetary constraints, conventions of the format, and/or nature of the program, do not (or cannot) offer formal sponsorship deals.

In these cases, the focus is usually on small food and beverage producers, who are identified and contacted through a range of means, including online calls for expression of interest and recommendations from the shows' hosts, and then assessed for suitability by the programs' producers.

Appearing on these types of programs generally does not require any payment from the food or beverage producer, although in-kind contributions of time and/or food and beverage products are typical. These types of 'free' appearances can offer great value for small businesses, without the resources of other forms of advertising, marketing or sponsorship.

Opportunities for brand management

Irrespective of the type of arrangement, or whether the business is big or small, appearing on food television can result in increased sales of food and beverage products—by up to as much as 1,400 per cent for some major television cooking shows.² While the value of short-term sales surges is not to be dismissed, the real benefits are in the longer-term promotion and brand management opportunities that can be built through media appearances.

For instance, when *MKR* contestants cook for Coles' farmers, the strategy is not specifically to increase sales for the lamb farmer, the watermelon farmer, or any of the other individual producers that may have appeared in the episode (although this may have indeed been one of the outcomes). Rather, the aim is to boost the reputation of Coles' fresh produce more broadly. This is a phenomenon referred to

as 'brand trait transference'.³ In this case, the 'culinary capital' of *MKR* is symbolically transferred both to the supermarket chain and to the producers who supply it.

This also applies to small food and beverage producers involved with niche programming. In these cases, the show's politics of valuing local, ethical, artisanal production can become linked to those of the food and beverage producers who appear on screen.

Remember: good television comes first

Food television can offer excellent promotion and brand management opportunities, but whether you are considering engaging in a formal brand partnership or participating in a 'free' television appearance, there are some key things to keep in mind.

First and foremost, it is vital to remain conscious of the fact that although brand promotion may be your main goal as a business operator, this is not necessarily a priority for the media production company or the broadcaster.

Even in paid sponsorship arrangements, the production team will require that branded content be an appropriate fit for the televisual context and be carefully integrated into storylines. If you are engaging in these types of arrangements, then you will typically have the resources to hire experts to help navigate the complex world of television sponsorship, but things can still go wrong.

The derision to which Handee was subject when its paper towels featured too prominently on *MasterChef*, is a lesson in what happens when promotion misses the mark.⁴

If you are a smaller food and beverage producer making your own arrangements directly with a television production company, it is important to remain conscious of the potential mismatches between your needs and expectations as a business owner against the needs and expectations of media producers seeking to make 'good television'.

Many food and beverage producers

who appear on food television feel disappointed at what they perceive to be an insufficient focus on their products or inadequate depth of coverage of their production practices. However, television shows are designed not with the promotion of producers' products in mind, but with a focus on audiences, entertainment value and commercial viability.

Excessive focus on products is boring for audiences and can be a ratings killer, particularly during primetime. Consequently, whenever the needs of food and beverage producers and media producers diverge, the needs of the television industry will almost always be prioritised.

Any publicity is not good publicity

The second thing to keep in mind is that not all promotional opportunities are created equal. If your primary market is demographically similar to the audience of the television show on which you have been invited to appear, then there is a potential to reap great benefit from your appearance on food television. But if, for example, your primary market is the restaurant industry yet the television show is watched mainly by the general public, then this opportunity is unlikely to offer many benefits.

The mantra of 'any publicity is good publicity' is simply not true of the food and beverage sector. Speaking to the wrong audience can result in wasted time, such as a large number of phone calls or emails from interested viewers who may not be the target market for your products, and may not even be able to purchase the products they have seen on screen.

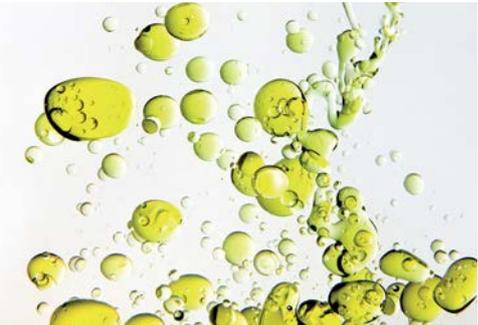
Television production is time consuming, therefore it is necessary to assess whether there is likely to be sufficient 'value for money' from your time investment. A few minutes of on-screen time can take a day or more to film, so it is vital not to expect that a time commitment of this length will necessarily result in extensive on-air coverage.



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It is also important to anticipate unexpected audience responses. You may or may not see an increase in product sales in the short-term. It may be disappointing not to see an immediate return on your efforts, but the opportunities of food television are best leveraged not as a short-term mechanism for increasing sales, but as part of a broader strategy of profile building and brand management.

Whether you are a small producer or one of the 'big boys', any appearances on food television should form part of a larger promotion plan. This can involve appearances across a range of media forms and platforms in order to consolidate your brand identity, help people remember your brand, and link your brand to other like-minded media properties and personalities.

Tips for getting the best results

1. *Anticipate the increased customer contact that can result from a food television appearance.* Make sure

your website is comprehensive and up-to-date. An engaging 'form letter' that provides information about you, your business and your products, and which you can email to interested customers, is also a good idea.

2. *Thoroughly research the show before agreeing to appear.* It is just not a case of 'any publicity is good publicity'. For best effect, the right message needs to reach the right audiences. Find out who the show's audience is and determine whether this is the right target market for your products.
3. *Be realistic about likely outcomes.* The promotional opportunities afforded by food television are best leveraged when used as part of a longer-term brand management strategy rather than as something expected to produce immediate results, so they should be approached in these terms. 

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