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Geek Chic

Science has never been cooler, and according to president and general manager Paul Lewis, Discovery Networks deserves a lot of the credit. Here, he gives a behind-the-scenes tour of the company's rise to science sovereignty.

By Matt Alderton



Sir Isaac Newton changed the world. So did Galileo Galilei, Charles Darwin, and Albert Einstein. If you ask Paul Lewis, however, the person most responsible for modern science isn't Marie Curie, Leonardo da Vinci, or Nikola Tesla. It's ... William Shatner?

"I grew up with Star Trek; it had a huge influence on my life," says Lewis, a self-described "Trekkie" and the head of Toronto-based Discovery Networks, which manages the Canadian versions of five cable TV channels: Discovery, Animal Planet, Science Channel, Discovery World, and Investigation Discovery. "In fact, one of the most popular shows ever to air on Discovery was a show we commissioned called *How* William Shatner Changed the World, which was a two-hour special that looked at the impact Star Trek had on an entire generation of scientists who created everything from mobile phones to automatic sliding doors to the latest medical monitoring equipment."

What Star Trek did for the current generation of scientists, Discovery is doing for the next. Which makes Lewis, its president and general manager, a modern-day Captain Kirk.

Paul's Picks

Its lineup of entertaining

yet educational programs

the cutting edge of cable

television. Here are

president and general

manager Paul Lewis's

favourite shows.

Daily Planet

puts Discovery Networks on

"I still have a strong emotional

attachment to this show. I like

watch six stories on completely

always topical because science

"I am fascinated by airplanes

a show that always intrigues

"How It's Made is really fun.

It's a show I commissioned

many years ago. It's a very

lightbulbs get made, how do

pencils get made, how does

plastic get made?—but I wasn't

it's a phenomenon; it's playing

on every Discovery network in

the world, which just goes to

show you [that] sometimes

simple is best."

Highway Thru Hell

"Highway Thru Hell has

everything you could possibly

well for Discovery. It's got

authentic characters, a good,

strong story arc, and a sense

of danger and jeopardy. It's

not scripted; it's real, and I

"Mighty Ships is produced by

our in-house production

Production Inc. It's a very

big ships and the fantastic

simple concept—it's all about

missions they go on—but it's

company, Exploration

become our biggest

international hit."

think our audience really

responds to that."

Mighty Ships

imagine in terms of what works

convinced it would work. Now

simple concept—how do

and airplane crashes, so this is

the magazine format; I can

unrelated topics, and it's

is all around us."

How It's Made

me."

"When I joined Discovery, it was an opportunity for me to bring to families in Canada the same spark that got me excited about science when I was a kid," says Lewis, whose love of Star Trek fuelled a childhood obsession with astronomy. "I owned a telescope from a very young age, and I used to take it out every night to look at the moon, the planets, and the stars. The sense of wonder I felt when I looked through my telescope at the planets is the same sense of wonder I want to instill in people who view our programming."

In a world that's dominated by tweets and texts, instilling a sense of wonder is more difficult than ever before. Discovery's rapid growth, however, has proven that it's up to the challenge. Its winning strategy, Lewis says, is a rare parallel between science and business: constant evolution.

Discovering Discovery

Despite his love for science, Lewis did not have a scientific mind. So he became a journalist.

"I would have loved to become an astronomer, but I was a terrible, awful, horrible science student," Lewis says. "One thing I was good at was writing, so when it came time to decide about university, journalism was an obvious choice."

He wanted to be a travel writer, until one of his instructors—Joan Donaldson, who later became the first head of CBC Newsworld—convinced him to pursue a career in broadcasting.

"Joan was a huge influence on my life," says Lewis, who, with Donaldson's help, landed a job interview at CBC Radio. "I didn't get the job in radio, but they said, 'Hey, we understand there might be an opening on the TV side of the business, in the CBC National TV News newsroom.' So I applied and got the job. That was the start of my career."

Lewis spent the next 14 years ascending the ranks of CBC National TV News, from journalist to executive producer. Paired with his passion for science, the experience primed him perfectly for Discovery, which launched in the United States in 1985. When it arrived in Canada, in 1994, Lewis jumped at the opportunity to contribute—even though nobody had heard of it.

"At the time, I was the first person in Canada to move from the CBC to a cable channel, and I was generally looked at as being completely insane," says Lewis, who asked Discovery Canada president Trina McQueen, a CBC alumnus, for a job. "Why would anyone leave the CBC—the best newsroom in the country, and one of the best journalistic organizations in the world—to go work for a fledgling cable channel that nobody knew anything about? It was a big risk."

Fortunately, the risk paid off: Discovery Canada was not only beloved but also groundbreaking—in particular, its signature program, a daily newsmagazine called @discovery.ca, which integrated audience feedback submitted via e-mail a full decade before the dawn of social media.

"We wanted to make a bold statement by integrating this crazy new technology called the Internet," says Lewis, who was the show's executive producer. "So we put our e-mail address on the screen so that people could send in their comments. It sounds pretty boring now but was actually extremely innovative back then."

Because nobody in the world had ever produced a daily onehour science magazine show, critics insisted that failure was imminent. And for a while, Lewis believed them. Still, he persisted. Twenty years later, the show—now called *Daily Planet*—has nearly two million weekly viewers, making it one of Discovery Canada's most popular programs.

Passionate Programming

Lewis's experience with @discovery.ca perfectly illustrates his approach to growing Discovery Networks, which he became president and general manager of in 2003. "If you really believe in something, it's going to be a struggle," he says. "It's going to be hard. There are going to be times that you just want to give up. But if you stick with it, it eventually will pay off."

In other words: passion begets passion. "The people who work here all share my passion and enthusiasm for what we do," Lewis adds. "And that's contagious. People just love Discovery. The positive emotional response we get from both our employees and our viewers is incredible."

That response has turned Discovery from a risky start-up into a successful global brand. During Lewis's tenure as president and general manager, for instance, Discovery Networks has grown from one channel to five; expanded from one medium (TV) to multiple (TV, Internet, social, and mobile); and tackled some of the most ambitious and innovative projects to ever hit Canadian airwaves, including Last Day of the Dinosaurs in 2010, which was Canada's first 3-D television program, and *Race to Mars*, a multimedia event about a fictitious Mars landing in the year 2030. Aired in 2007, the latter included a cinematic TV miniseries with state-of-the-art visual effects, a companion book, and a multimedia website that Discovery spent a record \$20 million to create.

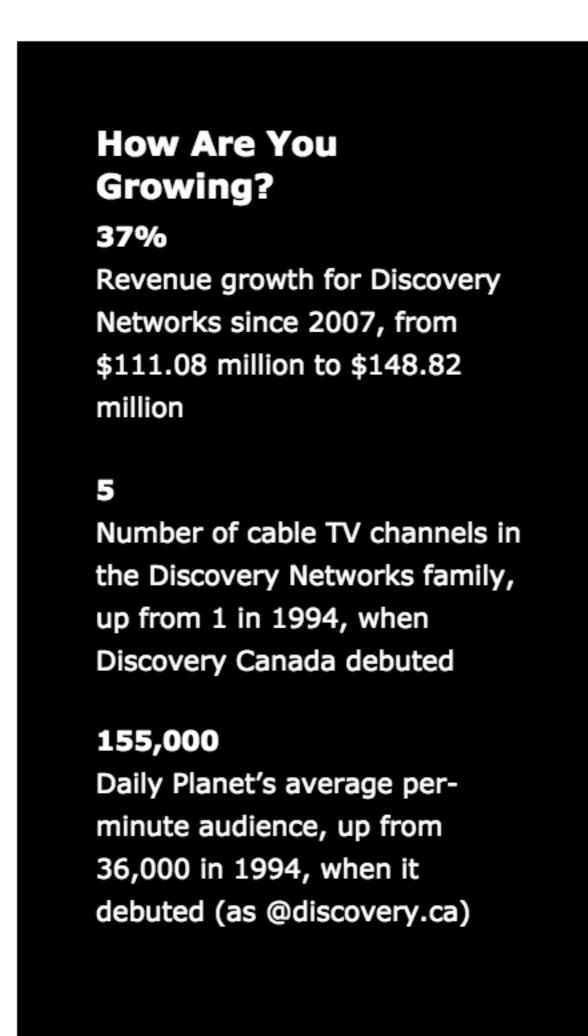
Of course, there have been setbacks, too. In summer 2014, for example, Discovery came under fire for a viral video it produced to promote its annual *Shark Week* event. The video, which raised the specter of sharks in Lake Ontario, was criticized for fearmongering.

Still, Lewis deems the video a success—proof that in television, even challenges can turn into opportunities. "It's been seen by over 650,000 people," he says. "You have to take risks in this business, and that can lead to criticism. But I think risks ultimately pay off."

Good or bad, Lewis doesn't look back. For Discovery, the result is constant forward motion. And from that, perpetual growth.

The Next Big Thing If the best way up is forward, one has to wonder where Discovery is going next.

"Our focus now is really on the digital side of the business," Lewis says. "We want to be everywhere our audience is."



The trouble is, audiences are constantly moving, and viewers' tastes constantly change. "When Discovery began, we could come up with a hit show and get two, three, or four great seasons out of it," Lewis says. "Now, within a matter of months, rather than years, your hit show starts to feel a bit tired, so we have to constantly anticipate what the next big thing will be."

In pursuit of "the next big thing," Discovery is constantly growing and expanding its programming, which now includes everything from host-driven shows such as *MythBusters* and reality TV shows such as *Highway Thru Hell* to scripted shows such as the 2014 miniseries *Klondike* and live programming that broadcasts simultaneously online and on TV.

Whatever the format, viewers can count on two things when they tune in: they will always be entertained, and they will always be educated.

"Whether it's dinosaurs, explosions, or engineering, the things you were interested in when you were eight years old are the things that will always attract an audience to Discovery, no

matter what," Lewis says. "That's what Discovery does best: despite the many changes it's experienced, it will always appeal to the inner child in all of us."

Ultimately, Lewis believes, viewers' inner child is what will keep the cable TV network relevant—even if cable TV as we know it disappears. "Really, we're not in the television business; we're in the content business," he says. "Television is just a medium for our content. It doesn't matter if it's on television, YouTube, our website, Twitter, or Facebook; if you have a compelling story to tell, people will always sit there and watch it. And storytelling is what we do better than anyone else. At the end of the day, we don't care how people are watching us—as long as they are watching us."

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