Zuku TV's original content strategy pays off

In 2012, the Pay TV market became a great deal more competitive but with DStv Multichoice having acquired most of the existing exciting content, the challenge has been for challengers to come up with different content. This week saw one of the challengers (Zuku TV) sell one of the series it has commissioned - Tales from the Bush Larder - to Fox International.

Balancing Act's broadcast analyst Sylvain Béletre talked to Hannelie Bekker, managing director of Wananchi Programming for Zuku TV about how it is seeking to create new, high-quality content.

Whereas in the past, pay TV networks looked quite similar, African television-platform companies are now starting to use various strategies in a race to differentiate themselves. While DStv is the older and largest African pay TV provider with a clientele of 5.6 million households across Africa (end 2012), StarTimes TV has increased its footprint and its number of accessible channels offered at low fees. Innovative pay TV players are also investing into the delivery of digital terrestrial television services.

East Africa's 'Zuku' - the consumer brand of Wananchi Group - has been focusing on new subscribers who want quality for their money. Originally, Zuku is a homegrown brand established with the aim of making quality home entertainment and communication services accessible to a rapidly growing, choice conscious East African middle class.

Part of the company's philosophy is to communicate to its market and be transparent and responsive with partners, from international content owners to local producers. The company is also a pioneer in the area of triple play in the East African region and its executives know the local culture very well.

Zuku TV is reported to have over 70 channels on the Zuku Satellite platform and more than 120 channels on the top-end Triple Play platform, aiming to keep the whole family entertained.

"We have built seven channels ourselves, soon to be eight. Also two of the movie channels are available in time shifted (+1) versions, and the sports channel and one of the movie channels are available in HD. For clarity: the seven home made channels are Zuku Afrika (general entertainment), Zuku Life (documentary), four movie channels and Zuku Sports."

Creating value

Bekker said, "There is a lot happening at Zuku right now as we want to keep creating value. Everyone knows that our consumers are price conscious; we are continuously aware that they are also highly value conscious." The company has been working on three areas: technology and signal quality, geographical expansion and programme quality. "We have been growing consistently, bearing out our analysis that there is interest from the public in our services."

As African countries start to moves from analogue to digital broadcast, the company wants all Zuku customers to get great quality signal available to them anywhere and everywhere in the countries where Zuku is present. In Kenya, the Zuku decoder is compliant to the digital migration requirements set out by CCK.

"On the technology front, one important move is that we are migrating our satellite-based service from NSS12 to SES-5. The primary purpose is to get more bandwidth and capacity in the region. It will also allow us to expand our channels line up, creating the opportunity for us to give back to our subscribers."

"When it comes to triple play we are continuously expanding our cable network, rolling out services to more communities."

Quality programming, quality content

The company started selling cable-based services in Nairobi in 2009; the satellite service only launched at the beginning of August 2011. Zuku's satellite service is only 18 months old and is already present in Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda. The company is looking for further expansion in East Africa. "Kenya represents the largest share of subscribers whereas Tanzania has been growing fast and activities in Uganda are starting to get momentum."

"Quality programming is a key part of Zuku's strategy. Late last year we commissioned an audience survey in Kenya. Surveys in Tanzania and Uganda will follow shortly. Qualitative and quantitative results are very positive for us. One thing that came out of this survey is that our audience really responds to local content and locally developed channels. Among subscribers to all pay-tv services, Free To Air channels get the largest viewership, but for Zuku subscribers they are closely followed by our Zuku channels which is a good sign for us."

Speaking about the audience's appetite for quality local content, Hannelie said: "While we invest very selectively we are one of the very few TV networks in Africa that is consistently willing to pay producers for content - and that way we can keep 100% control of our schedules. We license content both from the content and the international market. Last year we started originating a small amount of programming, some through pure commissions, and some through co-productions. We believe in collaborative relationships with producers."

Exciting times for African film

In May 2012 Zuku made the news headlines when it announced US$1 Million event sponsorship of the Zanzibar International Film Festival (ZIFF) for a period of ten years from 2012 to 2021 inclusive, with a focus on supporting ZIFF's film and festival promotion and marketing program.

"ZIFF has a proud 15 year history. This is an exciting time for African film and we want to work with the organisers to make the festival a destination of note!"

The ZIFF sponsorship, which is for a period of ten years, represents a budget of $100,000 per annum for Zuku.
"We invite producers to present their quality work at ZIFF. The emphasis is on African films from the continent, the Dhow countries and the diaspora". African film producers should look at the ZIFF 2013 call for submissions.

Zuku signs with Fox International

This month Zuku signed a licensing agreement with Fox International Channels (FIC) for the first season of 'Tales from the Bush Larder', a travel/cooking/adventure series co-produced by Zuku and Kenyan indie, Quite Bright Films.

"The warm reception that 'Tales from the Bush Larder' has received outside the borders of Kenya affirms our belief that there is a market for fresh, well-produced African programming. We are very pleased and proud to be entering into this relationship with FIC and look forward to seeing a 100% Kenyan production on international screens".

For more, go to www.zuku.co.ke

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