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TV Decoder

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NBC's Silverman Handicaps the Future, Including His Own

By BRIAN STELTER

The self-described “Paris Hilton of NBC,” Ben Silverman, talked about the network’s programming slate and business models at the New York Television Festival Monday afternoon.

The co-chairman of NBC Entertainment – you may have seen him guest-starring as himself in a recent episode of HBO’s “Entourage” – acknowledged that he hasn’t managed the “unrelenting press attention” as well as he could have since taking the job last summer.

Despite recent speculation that Mr. Silverman’s act is almost up at NBC, he said, “the fact is, I’m so committed to the job.” He said the Hilton reference was first uttered by the head of human resources at NBC.

Mr. Silverman spoke at the festival’s industry day in Manhattan. Donny Deutsch, the moderator of the session and the host of “The Big Idea” on CNBC, claimed at the beginning of the event that the “press is not reporting” NBC’s recent ratings success.

“We’ve won six weeks in a row,” Mr. Silverman beamed. The successes are partly the credit of NBC Sports, which produced the Olympics last month, and NBC News, which drew the most viewers of any broadcast network for political convention coverage.

Mr. Silverman commented on NBC’s decision to “bridge” the Olympics and the start of the fall season by using alternative shows like “America’s Got Talent” and the new competition show “America’s Toughest Jobs.” Highlighting his willingness to work with advertisers, he said the debut of “Jobs” was moved up one year, to summer 2008 from summer 2009, due to the desires of the advertiser Chrysler.

“They had a vehicle they wanted to launch, and we worked with them,” he said.

The advertiser-friendly approach extends beyond “Jobs.” “Every single first-year show we’ve launched has an advertising partner in place,” Mr. Silverman said, “which has probably never happened in broadcast TV.”

He said that the West Coast development and studio operations – the “costs” in his description – and the East Coast ad sales division – the “revenues” – were traditionally “totally disconnected.”

“We’ve really integrated those operations in a different way so that we’re thinking about

both things as we're going forward," he said.

Mr. Deutsch, a longtime ad executive, asked whether advertisers were really embracing the branded entertainment model. Mr. Silverman said they are moving in that direction, but "both sides have a huge evolution to go, still." Employing an Olympic analogy, he added, "there are a lot more laps in this race."

The Olympics, the big ratings winner for NBC last month, were a trademark example of event television – the kind of programming that gathers people together in front of the TV set at a specific time. Mr. Deutsch wondered whether broadcast TV would rely more on events going forward.

"I think we have to be doing more of that," Mr. Silverman said. "I think you'll see us green-light more and more live shows to get that together. We may acquire more and more events to feed that."

Near the end of the session, Mr. Silverman was asked what shows have a chance to emerge as successes in the upcoming TV season.

He said "The Mentalist," a drama on CBS, "looks the strongest," citing a good lead-in and an easy to grasp premise. He also named "Worst Week," a sitcom owned by Universal Media Studios that CBS will show on Tuesdays.